

HIGHLANDS TODAY



Blight Fight

A Lake Placid couple want some trashed trailers moved. **DETAILS, Page 2A**



Fired Up

Streaks volleyball team comes together for a win. **SPORTS, Page 1B**



Blue Light Special?

Three Avon Park women are accused of stealing from Kmart. **DETAILS, Page 6A**

MERCURIO RESIGNS

Blasts Council For Setting Him Up

By DOUG CARMAN
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AVON PARK — Outgoing Avon Park Police Chief Frank Mercurio said at a press conference late Wednesday morning that he will turn in his badge Friday, Sept. 28.

As he announced his resignation, he said he had been "set up" by the city and made out "to be a liar," during a budget meeting. He said he did not know specifically which council member requested the mileage chart that led to Councilman Doug Eason's accusations at the July 14th budget hearing, but he said the chart Eason had was fraudulent. City Manager C.B. Shirey's request for his resignation Tuesday was "drastic," considering his police record, Mercurio said.

At the July budget meeting, council members questioned the accuracy of Mercurio's mileage figures based on a mileage chart created by a city employee. Wednesday, City Clerk Sarah Adelt wouldn't identify who did the chart, only saying it came from Human Resources. Mercurio added, "At no time during my tenure as chief of police have I been counseled, sanctioned or (have had) any personnel action taken against me." He pointed to a 2002 evaluation, the only one on his file during his tenure, that gave him an overall "outstanding" rating. Several officers flanked the small room where the press conference was held. At times angry and hurt, Mercurio continued addressing several statements council members



Highlands Today photos by KATHY WATERS

Avon Park Police Chief Frank Mercurio shows a mileage chart that was created by an unidentified city employee, which he feels was inaccurate and contrary to city policy.

Eason, Brenda Gray and Joe Wright made Tuesday.

The city will begin looking for a police chief shortly. Shirey said that Cmdr. Michael Rowan will take over Mercurio's duties while the position's vacant.

Shirey explained Wednesday that the mileage chart issue was not the primary reason he requested Mercurio to resign. His decision was made because the Council did not trust Mercurio.

The Mileage Chart Dilemma

Mercurio continued questioning the mileage chart Eason produced during the budget hearing. **Please see MERCURIO on Page 11A** ▶



Jim Windsor, a resident of Avon Park for 30 years, talks about issues with the city council and the Avon Park Police Department on Wednesday. Outgoing Avon Park Police Chief Frank Mercurio put in his resignation Wednesday morning.

SENIORS' TAX EXEMPTIONS

County To Consider Increases

By JIM KONKOLY
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SEBRING — In November, Highlands County commissioners will begin looking at raising the property tax discount for lower-income homeowners age 65 and up.

Highlands County now offers 1/10th of this tax relief allowed by state law on homestead houses.

According to county tax records, 1,764 senior homeowners receive this tax break, which the county sets now at \$5,000 off taxable value.

State law allows counties to give up to 10 times that amount, up to a maximum exemption of \$50,000.

Known as Save Our Seniors, this property tax exemption is available to senior homeowners with an annual household income of \$23,600 or less.

"If there is an opportunity to take it up to (a) \$50,000 (exemption), I would hope that we could," Guy Maxcy, chairman of the commissioners, said. "But," he added, "I may be thinking too big, too optimistic."

Some increase in the exemption is justified, he said, because "our low-income seniors and our **Please see EXEMPTIONS on Page 8A** ▶

Union Passing On New Teacher Merit Pay Plan

HIGHLANDS WOULD FORGO \$640,000

By MARC VALERO
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SEBRING — Highlands County is among 14 districts opting not to participate in the new state teacher merit pay plan.

The Merit Award Program (M.A.P) is replacing the controversial Special Teachers are Rewarded (STAR) merit plan that lasted only one year.

"We have decided in negotiations so far to not participate in M.A.P. this current school year," said Stephen Picklesimer, president of the Highlands County teacher's union. A committee will explore options for a future merit award plan and the union will be surveying its membership to see whether they want to participate.

Highlands County teachers rejected the S.T.A.R. plan in February by a 2 to 1 vote.

"A lot of counties, like Highlands County, have not chosen to participate this year," he said. The timeline would have likely been too short to develop a plan to please the teachers since they had such a negative vote on the previous merit pay plan.

Forgoing the merit pay plan means the \$640,000 allocated by the state for Highlands County would go back to the state.

Picklesimer noted the teacher evaluation component of both plans.

S.T.A.R. was based on 50 percent FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test) scores and data showing student improvement and 50 percent on evaluation, he said. "Your relationship with your principal, the environment at your school, those kinds of things can be looked at as being political and can be looked at as showing favoritism."

The M.A.P. program is based 60 percent on **Please see PAY on Page 8A** ▶

Harder Hall Back-Up Contract Signed ... With Unexpected Party

By MANDY SHEETS
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SEBRING — The same day city council was poised to accept a back-up contract for Harder Hall another potential buyer stepped forward with a better offer.

Earlier this month, council accepted a contract with Sebring Hospitality Group, which offered to purchase the hotel for \$5.55 million. The group is undergoing its 30-day inspection period, which ends Oct. 5.

Councilors decided to secure a back-up contract in case Sebring Hospitality Group terminates the contract within the inspection period.

The council planned at Tuesday's meeting to approve a contract with Macartney and Associates, with a purchase price of \$5.5 million and a 60-day inspection period.

But a new sales contract surfaced at the last minute.

Nils Richter, representing Steve Israel, an investor from New York, **Please see CONTRACT on Page 8A** ▶

School Breakfast Grows In Student Popularity

By MARC VALERO
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AVON PARK — It's free, it's nutritious and some may say delicious — it's breakfast at school.

More Highlands County students are eating that important first meal of the day on campus.

Middle and high school students had no reason to skip breakfast Wednesday with a menu of scrambled eggs with ham, half an English muffin, grits, cinnamon toast, assorted cereals and choice of drink. Elementary students also had a variety of menu options, including scrambled eggs with ham.

This is National School Breakfast Week, which was launched in 1989 to raise awareness of the availability of the School Breakfast Program to all children. However, this year U.S. Department of Agriculture's Southeast Regional Office in Atlanta issued a challenge to increase School Breakfast Program participation in the region.



Highlands Today photo by KATHY WATERS

Avon Park Middle School student Luzdemarie Gomez, 12, enjoys breakfast served by worker Brenda Rivers on Wednesday morning. Schools throughout the state are celebrating school breakfast week.

In response to this challenge, the Florida Department of Education is trying to get the word out through its first annual Florida School Breakfast Week this week.

In Highlands County, breakfast is served free to all students, and breakfast participation continues to grow, said Martha Brown, district

food service coordinator. In the 2005-06 school year, 678,381 breakfasts were served. In the 2006-07 school year, the number grew to 868,110 breakfasts.

All schools serve breakfast in the cafeterias. However, a new program that allows students to eat breakfast in the **Please see BREAKFAST on Page 8A** ▶