

HIGHLANDS TODAY



DID YOU SEND IN YOUR VOTE?
Voting is under way for the Cutest Kid Contest. Get your votes in by Oct. 31 and check out the online photo gallery too!
VOTING FORM, Page 3B



CRUISE CONTROL
Sebring Blue Streaks routed Booker in three sets in the opening round of the Class 4A-District 10 tournament on Monday. **SPORTS, Page 1B**



UNDERWATER ART
A local diver blew away the competition in the Keys.
DETAILS, Page 4A

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How To Spruce Up Downtown Sebring?

NEW CURBS, LANDSCAPING ARE SOME OPTIONS

By MANDY SHEETS
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SEBRING — Although the downtown Circle and its surrounding streets could use some sprucing up, officials say they don't have plans to mess with a good thing.

As the Community Redevelopment Agency members started to plan Streetscape IX at Monday's meeting, they decided to make some small changes for aesthetic purposes and fix some ongoing problems.

"From working with a lot of communities, I can tell you, you have a very successful CRA," said Jack Breed, of Keith and Schnars, the planning firm handling the project. "You have a historic foundation that you are trying to redevelop, and I think a few things can be done to spruce it up, but I wouldn't recommend any major overhauls."

Money will likely be the biggest factor in deciding how to proceed with the project, which will include the Circle and the six radial streets between the Circle and Wall Street.

Pollard said he expects the city **Please see DOWNTOWN on Page 9A**

Sebring Student Gets Extra D.A.R.E. Training

By MARC VALERO
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SEBRING — Sebring High School junior Ricki Albritton has a good excuse to miss school on Friday — she will be receiving training in Drug Abuse Resistance Education as Florida's D.A.R.E. youth representative.

Ricki and her mother, Diana, will be flying to Washington, D.C., for two days of training (Friday and Saturday) at the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Academy, located on the Marine Corps Base at Quantico, Va.

Ricki is excited the training includes a session on public speaking because she is planning a career as a public speaker.

"I just like speaking to people; I like meeting new people," she said. "If something is on my mind, I'm one of those kind of people who shares it with people. I just like talking."

The training also includes sessions on over-the-counter and prescription drugs and club drugs.

Diana will attend separate training sessions designed for the parent chaperones.

Ricki is not exactly sure how she will use her training, but she **Please see D.A.R.E. on Page 9A**



ALBRITTON

TEEN COURT



Highlands Today photos by JESSE OSBOURNE

Attorney T.J. Wohl, right, talks to a group of Teen Court participants Monday night about defending other students in upcoming cases. Local attorneys participate in the program to help students understand the legal system.

Students Dispense Justice To Other Students

By DAN FEARNOR
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SEBRING — Brennan Caspare, who stands less than 5 feet tall, could barley see over the podium as he argued why the defendant should be punished for stealing purses.

"The defendant didn't have any money so she shouldn't have gone to the store to begin with," argued Caspare, an eighth-grader at Sebring Middle School.

On Monday night, Caspare was participating with 50 other students in Teen Court, a program run by teens, ages 12 through 18.

While Judge Peter Estrada presided over the courtroom, the teens performed the roles of prosecutors, defense attorneys, bailiffs, clerk and jurors.

"People are always worried that kids have nowhere to go after school," said Estrada, before Monday's session began. "This gives them something."

With teenagers calling the shots, questions about allowances were admissible, but like



Kaitlyn Truelove, a seventh-grader at Hill-Gustat Middle School, played the role of the clerk and swore in jurors during Monday night's Teen Court session.

a famous television show warns its viewers, "The cases are real. The rulings are final."

"I really enjoy doing this, it's a lot of fun," said Andrew Fuller, 16, a student at Sebring High School, who played a prosecutor.

"I think this is really good

for kids because it lets them know about the seriousness of their actions and the seriousness of the court process."

Students who are defendants in Teen Court have already admitted their guilt, and must have their parent **Please see COURT on Page 9A**

Prisoners Stay Busy Doing City Work

By DOUG CARMAN
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AVON PARK — Sometimes, for the city, there just isn't enough prison labor to go around.

City Project Manager Maria Sutherland realized it while she tried to arrange for inmates to mow the "pizza slice," that triangle at the west end of the Avon Park mall near the intersection of Main Street and U.S. 27.

She told the city council Monday evening that she used to have "easy access" to the inmate labor while former Parks and Recreation Director Tony Anderson was around. Lately, however, she has had trouble getting them scheduled.

Tuesday morning, Sutherland added that she had some problems coordinating the schedules with the public works department, which was "hogging up" the labor.

"They're a high commodity and I don't blame them (the public works department) for keeping them to themselves," Sutherland said. "They have a lot on their plate."

Ted Long, the department's coordinator, said Tuesday that he was trying to rework the scheduling, and he realized the demand for them.

"Every department in the city has used them for something," he said.

Avon Park uses a correctional officer and a five-member crew of inmates from the Avon Park Correctional Institution to handle a lot of the city's street and right-of-way maintenance. For some side projects, the city's project manager uses them as well to take on tasks ranging from taking care of plants to mowing the mall. Long, however, uses them "99 percent" of the time.

"Other departments have a staff and have departments," Sutherland said. "I don't have it. I have to basically beg for the inmates to come."

In the mall's case, she said she has contractors to handle the rest of the mall, but it would have been too much money to weed the corner without the prison labor.

Sebring uses APCI as well as Highlands County Jail inmates in its public works department as well, although Public Works Superintendent George Fox said he's the only department in the city that relies on them. Lake Placid Town Clerk Arlene Tucker said it uses only Highlands County Jail inmates for Keep Lake Placid Beautiful.



SUTHERLAND

SUPER FLY

Biologists Hope Insect Will Rescue The Lovely Bromeliad



Mike Burton, a University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences biologist, releases 100 lixadmonti franki flies. Their larva eats Mexican bromeliad weevil larva.

By GARY PINNELL
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SEBRING — If you're in Highlands Hammock State Park and a fly lands on your nose, don't swat it. That might be Franki, who's flying to the rescue of bromeliads everywhere.

One hundred lixadmonti franki flies were released in the hammock and thousands more across south Florida to combat the evil Mexican weevil, whose nests destroy bromeliads.

What are bromeliads? They're epiphytes, meaning they grow on trees. Most have long thin leaves and some have a brilliant flower, which sprout from a rain-filled core or cup.

There are 20 varieties of bromeliads in Florida, not just in state parks, but on private property as well.

The pineapple bromeliad is related to the pineapple family, with its long mint-green leaves. Another looks like pine needles stuck in the side of a tree. The best known bromeliad is Spanish moss.

"Some people think Spanish moss is a parasite, but it's not, it's an airplant," said

Dorothy Harris, park services specialist.

The real parasites in this story are weevils, which shred the inside of the bromeliad to make a cocoon.

"The larvae," said Harris, "destroy the host plant as they tunnel and feed within its interior. You don't see the weevil itself. You see it when the plant falls to the ground like leaf litter."

The weevils were first discovered in 1989 in imported nursery plants, then in Highlands County in March 1999, said Howard Frank, a University of Florida professor. They've spread through 21 counties in southern Florida, from the Keys north to Orange County.

"Once we were aware they were in Florida, we started doing surveys in the park," said Harris. At first, they saw an abundance of healthy bromeliads. These days, not so many.

"Our plants got eaten," Harris said. "After the hurricanes in '04, it seems like the fall-out has gotten less. But we have far fewer plants than we had. The wind blew a lot out of the trees. Some plants are

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