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SWFL CHRONICLE

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Future Lee County
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Amanda Cochran
Kim Amontree
Charlotte County
Commissioner candidate
Gisele "GiGi" Gentile
School Board Candidate
Councilperson Teresa
Watkins Brown



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SWFL CHRONICLE

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Free Autism Screening for Young Children

Golisano Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida offers free monthly autism spectrum disorder screenings for toddlers 18 months to five years of age.

THE NEXT SCREENINGS WILL BE HELD ON MAR. 13 AND MAR. 18 FROM 9 A.M. - 2 P.M. AT THE PEDIATRIC SPECIALIST OFFICE, 15901 BASS ROAD, SUITE 102, FORT MYERS.

It is estimated that one in every 31 children is diagnosed with some form of Autism Spectrum Disorder, making it more common than childhood cancer, juvenile diabetes and pediatric AIDS combined.

Medical consultants for the project stress that an early diagnosis can make a vast difference for toddlers and their families. They say early intensive behavioral intervention can make an immense difference not just in the development of the child, but in their families as well.

The ASD screening is conducted by the Golisano Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida. The screenings are administered by an Advanced Practice Registered Nurse, who has extensive training and experience in typical child development and developmental disorders.

A physician referral is not required. To schedule a screening, please call 239-343-6838.



About Golisano Children's Hospital

Established in 1994, Golisano Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida has been named a "Top Hospital" three consecutive years by The Leapfrog Group. It is the only recognized children's hospital between Tampa and Miami. Lee Health opened the new 134-bed Golisano Children's Hospital in May 2017, relocating the children's hospital from the adjacent HealthPark Medical Center. It includes comprehensive pediatric services including a 24-hour pediatric emergency department, hematology-oncology unit, milk lab, Regional Perinatal Intensive Care Center, and Level II and Level III NICU with 70 private rooms. Golisano Children's Hospital is proud to have been named Soliant's 2018 Most Beautiful Hospital in the U.S., a recognition determined by popular vote. For more information, visit GolisanoChildrensSWFL.org



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WHAT THE FLORIDA HOMESTEAD STUDY MEANS **for our Community**

MAYOR TERESA LEE HEITMANN
CITY OF NAPLES

239-213-1000

Mayorheitmann@naplesgov.com



As your Mayor, it is important to me that our residents understand how decisions in Tallahassee may affect life here in Naples. The Florida Homestead Study helps explain what could happen if the state makes major changes to homestead property taxes, and I want to share the key points with you in simple, clear terms.

The study shows that different homestead ideas such as eliminating property taxes altogether or raising exemptions would create winners and losers. Some homeowners would get large tax cuts, while others, including renters and new homebuyers, would see no benefit at all. In fact, renters may end up paying more if property owners raise rents to cover higher tax burdens.

Another concern is fairness. Wealthier coastal communities might absorb the financial impact more easily, while smaller inland towns could struggle. This creates long term imbalances between communities.

For local governments, property taxes are not just a number. They are the foundation that pays for the services we depend on every day. Across Florida, about 43 percent of a city's general revenue comes from property taxes. If homestead taxes are sharply reduced or eliminated, cities could lose a large portion of their funding. The report shows that under some proposals, cities might lose between 25 percent and 38 percent of their property tax revenue. To keep essential services such as police, fire, parks, and roads, cities would need to raise millage rates almost double or cut services. This kind of instability can affect credit ratings, infrastructure planning, and public safety.

Rural communities would feel the hardest impact. Many do not have other revenue sources, and losing property taxes would make it difficult for them to maintain emergency services, fix roads, or invest in long term development.

The study also highlights ways to offer relief to homeowners without harming local services. These include income based or senior focused exemptions, state cost sharing programs, and giving cities more flexibility to manage their own revenue. Clear communication with residents about the trade offs is also essential.

In simple terms, property tax reform must be done carefully. While we all support fairness and relief for families, we must also protect the essential services that keep our communities safe, clean, and strong. Naples has always planned wisely and responsibly, and we will continue to advocate for balanced solutions that support our residents while preserving the fiscal foundation of our city.

As always, I remain committed to transparency and to keeping you informed. Thank you for allowing me the privilege of serving you.

Mayor Teresa Heitmann

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DEAR *Beloved*

Pastor Dr. Deb Walsh | Mountain Mover & Water Walkers

His last days...

At this time, over 2,000 years ago, Jesus was living in His last days prior to His death. He was spending time with loved ones as portrayed in the dinner in Bethany at Lazarus' house. He is anointed with perfume by Mary. He enters Jerusalem triumphantly. Preaches in the temple after overturning the money changer tables. He gives the blessings at the Mount of Olives. He has his last supper with the beloved disciples. He is transfigured on the mount that James, Peter and John witnessed. He prays in the Garden which started the final days of being brought to the courts for judgment.

As we are to imitate Christ, we can learn from how He prioritized His last days. He spent time with loved ones in communion and fellowship. He corrected wrongs by overturning the tables. He gave blessing to the people. He taught about how He was going to prepare a place for us and about His very own death and resurrection. He prays and is ministered to for courage by Moses, Elijah, Father God and angels in the garden and on the mount of transfiguration. Saints, according to the end of days prophecy, we are in the end of days. We need to follow Jesus' example and spend time with loved ones, mend relationships, correct what we need to correct in our lives, and most importantly, spend time with God in prayer and praise.

You may have known someone who was given a diagnosis that declared they only had days/weeks left to live. As they receive the news, they likely begin to make amends with others, spend time with loved ones, and prioritize their time to turn their heart to God telling loved ones about the gospel and making sure everyone will be in heaven. My mother received that diagnosis and did pass in weeks from cancer. I remember prioritizing my time to be with her.

Saints, we should live like we are in the end days and prioritize what is important. Repent from our sins and turn our hearts to God. We should be spending time with loved ones and people in general to share the love of God and the gospel to lead them to salvation. We should be mending relationships and asking for forgiveness. We also need to forgive those who have wronged us so we don't hinder our own salvation as stated in Matthew 6:14-15 " For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." Living like this will bring you fulfillment and purpose that will bring about the fruits of the spirit and abundant life. The results of this type of living in peace by faith, hope and love as stated in

1 Corinthians 13:13 "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

Remember, Jesus gave His life willingly for you. He took your sin debt and paid the penalty and price with His blood. He loves you beyond measure and only thinks good thoughts about you. Just as you are today, come—come to Jesus and let Him be your Lord and Savior. Ask Him to come into your heart and abide in you. Give Him the opportunity to give you abundant life. Once you do, find a bible-believing church and profess Jesus as your Lord publicly in baptism and gain your citizenship in heaven. Don't wait. It will be the best decision of your life. I guarantee it.

Love, Pastor Dr. Deb Walsh





SOUTHWEST FLORIDA
Community
PRAYER BREAKFAST



SPONSORS NEEDED

Help us unite the community in prayer.

Keynote Speaker Nick Vujicic

**Tickets are complimentary and available
on a first come, first serve basis at
CommunityPrayerBreakfast.com**

Thursday, May 7, 2026 • 6:00 AM

sponsors@communityprayerbreakfast.com

Dear sponsors and prospective sponsors,

With the 2026 Southwest Florida Community Prayer Breakfast quickly approaching, we invite you to consider a final opportunity to partner with us in support of this powerful community gathering. For those who have already committed their sponsorship, please share with others you think would be interested in supporting this very special event.

The annual breakfast will honor the National Day of Prayer on Thursday, May 7 with breakfast at 6 a.m. and a program at 7 a.m. at the Caloosa Sound Convention Center. Made possible through the generosity of sponsors, admission remains complimentary to attendees and provides an opportunity for the community to gather in prayer, reflection and unity.

This year's keynote speaker is Nick Vujicic, an internationally recognized evangelist, author and founder of Nick V Ministries. Born without arms or legs, Nick has spent his life sharing a message rooted in faith, perseverance and purpose. Through his personal testimony, he speaks candidly about overcoming adversity and finding hope through faith. He has traveled worldwide, reaching audiences of all ages and backgrounds, and continues to inspire millions through his ministry and service. To discover more about Nick's transformational ministry and his mission to share the Gospel, visit his website NickVMinistries.org.

Sponsorship is essential to the continued success of the Prayer Breakfast, enabling us to host the event at no cost to attendees.

We are sincerely grateful to those who have already committed their support. As we finalize preparations, we invite those prayerfully considering sponsorship to reach out to us with any questions or to confirm your commitment.

Your partnership ensures we can continue bringing Southwest Florida together in faith, unity and prayer.

With gratitude,
Ron Inge, President

★ **Level - \$10,000**

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★ **Level - \$1,000**

Benefits:

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For more information or to confirm your sponsorship, please contact us at sponsors@communityprayerbreakfast.com or call Holly Boldrin at 239-267-2638.



Cape Coral Hospital Earns Magnet Designation from the American Nurses Credentialing Center, Marking Third Lee Health Hospital Recognized in 2026

Lee Health is proud to announce that Cape Coral Hospital has achieved Magnet designation from the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC). This prestigious recognition is the highest honor awarded for nursing excellence and makes Cape Coral Hospital the third Lee Health hospital to earn Magnet status in 2026.

Earlier this year, both Lee Health's Golisano Children's Hospital and HealthPark Medical Center received their inaugural Magnet designations, underscoring Lee Health's systemwide commitment to advancing nursing excellence and delivering exceptional patient care throughout Southwest Florida.

The Magnet Recognition Program® identifies healthcare organizations worldwide where nursing leaders and frontline teams collaborate on strategic priorities with improvements in patient outcomes. This voluntary credential is widely regarded as the gold standard for nursing excellence, recognizing organizations that demonstrate superior clinical outcomes, strong interdisciplinary collaboration, innovation in practice and a culture that empowers nurses at every level.

"Achieving Magnet designation across three of our hospitals in one year is an extraordinary milestone for our health system and for the communities we serve," said Jennifer Higgins, DNP, RN, Chief Nursing Officer for Lee Health. "At each location, the recognition reflects a deep and sustained commitment to patient safety, evidence-based

practice and professional growth. It speaks to the expertise and dedication of our nurses and interdisciplinary teams, who consistently deliver compassionate, high-quality care."

Magnet-designated organizations are recognized for delivering safer, higher-quality care, including lower mortality rates, fewer patient falls, reduced hospital-acquired infections and higher patient satisfaction. These organizations also foster professional environments where nurses are supported in advancing their education, participating in research and contributing to shared governance and decision-making. This culture not only strengthens clinical outcomes but also attracts and retains highly skilled healthcare professionals.

To earn Magnet designation, each Lee Health hospital recognized demonstrated excellence across the full Magnet framework, including transformational leadership, structural empowerment, exemplary professional practice, new knowledge and innovation, and empirical outcomes that meet or exceed national benchmarks. The designation affirms the hospital's focus on continuous quality improvement, interdisciplinary collaboration and measurable performance results.

With three hospitals now recognized in 2026, Lee Health continues to strengthen its position as a regional and national leader in nursing excellence, reinforcing its mission to provide exceptional care for every member of the community close to home.



ABOUT LEE HEALTH

Lee Health has been a cornerstone of health care in Southwest Florida since opening its first hospital in 1916. As a non-profit, integrated health system, Lee Health is dedicated to providing high-quality, compassionate care to everyone, regardless of their ability to pay. With a strong commitment to community health and wellness, Lee Health commits to evolving with the growing and changing needs of the region. The system offers comprehensive services through four acute care hospitals, Golisano Children's Hospital, three skilled nursing locations, outpatient facilities, urgent care centers, and a wide network of primary care and specialty practices. Lee Health supports every step of the health journey, from preventive care to advanced treatment for every member of our community. Learn more at www.LeeHealth.org.

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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

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PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- Leadership & Confidence Development
- **Personalized Portfolio Building**
- College & Career Readiness
- Network with Local Professionals

TUITION

Full Tuition: \$1,000 (Includes two weeks of instruction, materials, portfolio building, guest speakers, daily snacks, and a legacy showcase for families)
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International Women's Day

HEALTH • WEALTH • FAITH

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Brunch™



Saturday, March 7, 2026
⌚ 11:15 AM – 2:00 PM
📍 10 Twenty Five, 33 Patio De Leon, Fort Myers, FL

What to Expect

- 🍷 Brunch & Music
- 🎮 Interactive SheBINGO™
- 🎁 Prizes & 50/50
- 👩 Vendors & Community Resources
- 🎁 Prizes & 50/50
- 💕 Sisterhood & Connection

Ticket Options (Pay at the Door)

- \$35 – Brunch + 1 SheBINGO Card
- \$45 – Brunch + 3 SheBINGO Cards
- \$10 Kids Club (Ages 5-12)
- ✓ Includes food & supervised activities

📄 Sponsorship & Vendor Opportunities
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Why Party City Failed in Collier and Lee Counties

by Barbara B. Kanter

I have known for at least 30 years that we shouldn't fill balloons with helium. Helium is a finite resource essential for modern infrastructure, not just party decor. It is the only element cold enough to cool MRI magnets and is critical for manufacturing semiconductors, fiber optics, and pressurizing rocket fuel. Squandering this rare gas on fleeting balloons is a dangerous failure of resource management.

The colorful aisles are gone. The Party City locations that once anchored our local shopping centers—specifically at 4377 Tamiami Trail N in Naples and 5025 S Cleveland Ave in Fort Myers—have shuttered, leaving a void in Collier and Lee counties. Their closure wasn't just a casualty of online shopping; it was a self-inflicted wound caused by executive inertia in the face of two existential threats: a fragile supply chain and a massive cultural shift.

THE "HELIUM DEATH SPIRAL."

The retailer's business model relied entirely on helium balloons as a "loss leader." When SWFL parents came for balloons, they filled their baskets with high-margin plastic tableware, decorations, and costumes.

This strategy faced a slow-motion train wreck. The market's structural instability began with the Helium Privatization Act of 1996. Since the mid-2000s, the industry faced recurring shortages, with prices climbing steadily for a generation. The acute crises of 2019 and 2022 were simply the final blows in a predictable volatility cycle.

Despite ample warning, leadership failed to hedge against a commodity that had been flashing red for 20 years. When costs finally tripled, they were forced into a fatal choice: raise prices and alienate budget-conscious families in Fort Myers, or absorb the cost and erode margins.

THE "PLASTIC GUILT" FACTOR

Simultaneously, the brand failed to read

the market in affluent markets such as Naples. The "Pinterest Aesthetic" moved consumer preference toward reusable fabric, paper, and "organic" party decor.

A growing environmental consciousness made single-use plastic decor and "balloon releases" socially embarrassing.

Party City's inventory—neon plastic and licensed character throwaways—clashed with the new "conscious consumer" ethos of the Gulf Coast.

THE INVESTOR WIPEOUT

Key decision-makers, including former CEOs James M. Harrison and Brad Weston, failed to pivot. Investors sued, alleging executives breached fiduciary duties by misrepresenting liquidity. The outcome was catastrophic: In the Chapter 11 restructuring, original common stockholders were wiped out, receiving zero recovery.

THE LESSON

Party City allowed a geological scarcity to dictate its foot traffic and ignored a moral shift in consumption. For retailers in Collier and Lee counties, the lesson is clear: If your product becomes socially taboo or operationally unreliable, marketing cannot save you. You must change the mode. Years before the bankruptcy filing, executives could have changed the product mix. Rather than addressing the inevitable by liquidating and adjusting the product mix, they held on to the end.



Eyes of My Heart

BY LISA ESWAY



He is a faithful God. There is so much about Him. There are so many ways that He desires to show up in our lives. We haven't even recognized it yet. We haven't met all of God yet. As we move through different seasons of our lives we need to see Him in different ways. I am hearing this for a reason. I am not as far as I think I am. God knows the things that I don't. From that life that God called me to live from that freedom that feels like some sort of dream right now. I'm not as far as I think I am. Remember these moments that you have in your life. Like when you know something. You don't know how you know it but you sense it. Even though your senses are telling you different your spirit sees it. **Joh 21:4. Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize it was Jesus.** How many times have you not realized God was showing up in your life? It doesn't mean that He wasn't there. He was there. They weren't aware of it. He was already there. But He waited because He wanted to show them

something before they got there too. Now a way to view this is.... Is He already there? Or is He not yet there? Some Promises have already been fulfilled. Then there are some that are not yet fulfilled. I can look back at relationships that God has brought into my life and relationships that I have asked Him for and He said not yet. Not yet. I look back over some of the already blessings in my life and I see that God has already been working on this a long time for me. He's already done so much for me. The more that I access the already blessings in my life the more aware I am able to deal with the not yet questions. Yes I may want God to add things to my life but being blessed may not be about what He might add or might not add. It's about what I access in what I already do have this is my process of gratitude. A little exercise. Because when I am unaware of a blessing it feels like it's not there but it is. When I get adjusted to something that I have actually had access to for a long time I get acclimated to what's

available. Then I become unaware of how valuable it becomes and that it is. Because I have to become acclimated to what is available. He is there in ways I am not aware. Right now. Come to yourself today. God sees you as you already are. God is already there. You haven't just seen yourself His way yet. So Jesus is on the shore. He is there. They are not aware. He can be there. But until you are aware it will feel as though He is not. They didn't know it. The challenge is to stand in the middle of my not yet and know Jesus is there. That He was there. He was there. God is going to beat you to it. For me I have proof that He has been there for me. More than any other person in my life. I have already seen the ways He has made for me. I have already seen the things that He has brought me through. I already know. For me believing in God means conscious contact. To trust in God of the things that I don't even see yet every step I take. In a situation I already know that He has an answer and a reason and a solution.

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OPERA NAPLES

ANNOUNCES ADDITION OF SAMANTHA HANKEY CONCERT TO 2025/26 SEASON



An Evening with Opera Star Samantha Hankey

April 7 // 7pm
Moorings Presbyterian Church

Samantha Hankey mezzo-soprano
Ramón Tebar piano

A much sought after recitalist who has been praised by the Financial Times for her “much elegance and youthful tone,” Hankey has enjoyed a rapidly rising career with appearances at The Metropolitan Opera, Vienna State Opera, Royal Opera House, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Carnegie Hall and The Kennedy Center, among other premier performance halls around the world.

A resident of Naples, Florida, Hankey will be joined for this performance by Opera Naples Artistic and Music Director Ramón Tebar at the piano. Maestro Tebar commented, “I have been following Samantha’s career for some years now, and she is an artist I wanted very much to perform with. When I found out that she is local and spent many summers in Naples during childhood and is now living in town, I couldn’t resist adding a performance with her as soon as possible. I am very happy that she made herself available while in town between her international engagements to perform in this recital.”

VIP tickets: \$250
(includes premium seating plus pre-concert and post-concert receptions)

GA tickets: \$50

OPERA NAPLES FESTIVAL 2026 *Under the Stars*

As an extension of the 2026 Festival Under the Stars (February 13 to March 15), Opera Naples plans to conclude performance season with intimate concert featuring renowned mezzo-soprano on April 7

March 10 // 10am
Baker Park
2026 Opera Naples Festival Under the Stars

Opera Naples will host a press conference in advance of the 2026 Festival Under the Stars.

The press conference will feature key festival representatives, including Opera Naples Executive Director Melanie Kalnins and Artistic and Music Director Ramón Tebar. Members of the media are encouraged to RSVP for the event at ralbaugh@operanaples.org or by calling 239-844-SING.

Tickets: Reserved Seating \$38-\$157. VIP Tables start at \$390, including access to a VIP reception from 6-7pm.



March 7 // 10am
Baker Park
FREE Family and Community Day

This event features activities and special performances for the whole family. A children’s-themed opera performance presented by

the Opera Naples Resident Artists, plus fun activities and games, bounce house, face painting and balloon artistry. Admission is free; no tickets required.



March 7 // 7pm
Wang Opera Center
Stars and Standards: An American Songbook Celebration

Step into an evening of timeless tunes as Opera Naples brings iconic melodies to life, featuring beloved classics from composers such as Berlin, Bernstein, Gershwin and Porter. It’s a night of nostalgia, charm and pure American musical magic.



March 11 // 7pm
March 13 / 7pm
Baker Park
Turandot by Giacomo Puccini

Puccini’s Turandot is a grand and emotionally charged opera set in ancient China, where a cold-hearted princess challenges suitors with deadly riddles. Featuring the iconic aria “Nessun dorma,” this visually stunning production delivers a powerful blend of passion, mystery and unforgettable music. Sung in Italian with English supertitles.



March 12 // 7pm
March 14 // 7pm
Baker Park

The Elixir of Love by Gaetano Donizetti
Donizetti’s The Elixir of Love is a charming romantic comedy filled with playful twists, heartfelt melodies and irresistible humor. When a lovestruck young man tries to win the heart of his beloved with the help of a “magic” potion, chaos and laughter ensue. This delightful opera sparkles with warmth, wit and timeless appeal. Sung in Italian with English supertitles.



March 14 // 1pm
FGCU's Bower School of Music & the Arts
 Semifinal Round of the Luciano Pavarotti Foundation Opera Naples International Voice Competition
 Join the Opera Naples Chorus and Resident Artists for an

unforgettable evening celebrating the power and beauty of the human voice with famous opera choruses. Featuring highly recognizable repertoire with selections from popular works such as Carmen and La Traviata, this uplifting program showcases timeless works that have inspired audiences for generations. Experience the rich harmonies that only a full chorus can deliver.

Ticket availability varies by event. For tickets, please visit OperaNaples.org. Millennium Club and members may purchase tickets with Concierge Ticketing by calling Rita Albaugh at 239-844-SING or emailing ralbaugh@operanaples.org.

Opera Naples is grateful for sponsorship support from Larry and Louise Ost, Sally Gleason, John and Nicoletta Pepe, Melody Sawyer Richardson, Cindy Stegemann, Susan Gibbons, Kathleen Field Orr and Roy Beck, Steve and Kathy Nichols, Bruce and Lois Selfon, Ronald C. Smith, Ice Miller, PNC Private Bank, Starkweather & Shepley Insurance, Freeman's, Bentley Naples, Ciccarelli Advisory Services, FineMark National Bank & Trust, Florida Trust Wealth Management, Peacock + Lewis Architects and Planners, Stock Development, Luciano Pavarotti Foundation, Gulfshore Life, The Naples Press, Naples Daily News, Gulfshore Ballet, Winfield Coffee, City of Naples, National Endowment for the Arts, Florida Theatrical Association and the Naples, Marco Island, Everglades Convention and Visitors Bureau, Florida's Paradise Coast.

Civil War Contada

We are pleased to invite you to be our guests at one of the two performances.

This newly-commissioned work weaves together first-hand writings from the great-great-grandfather of Artistic Director, Matthew Koller, penned during his service fighting for the Union in the Civil War, with musical themes and writings by formally enslaved individuals and their descendants. With music as the catalyst, these voices create a space for understanding and reflection.

The cantata will be performed by two soloists, including Tanisha Anderson (tanishalanderson.com/) and Matthew Koller's son, Christian Koller (music.fsu.edu/person/christian-koller/). A string quartet will set the scene, with our 100 + voice choir embodying the characters in the story. Composed by contemporary composer Thomas LaVoy, The Witness is an expressive and poignant work that we are honored to share with you.

We hope you will join us for this special premiere. So that we may plan for your attendance, please let me know which of the two performances you plan to attend and if you prefer seating at the front of the venue or in the middle. Tickets will be held for you at the Will Call/check-in in each location. I will be in attendance at both performances and will look forward to warmly welcoming you to one of the premieres.

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The music is in part built on themes by black composers who were formerly enslaved, or whose ancestors were enslaved.

This work represents musical perspectives that would never have come into their eventual forms without the existence of the institution of American slavery; an institution that James and his companions fought so hard to dismantle.

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 FAITH PRESBYTERIAN, CAPE CORAL

SUN MAR 22 4:00 PM
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John Gunter

MAYOR OF
CAPE CORAL

Mayor John Gunter
239-574-0436
jgunter@capecoral.gov

January 2025 Message
from capecoral.gov

DEAR RESIDENTS OF CAPE CORAL,

As we begin March, Cape Coral is full of activity and progress. This is a busy time of year for our community, and I am grateful for everyone who helps make our city a great place to live, work, and raise a family.

Public safety and transportation will continue to be two of my top priorities. We have made important strides in recent years, including major investments in our Police and Fire Departments and key roadway and infrastructure improvements, but we know there is still more work to do to keep our community safe and moving. I remain committed to supporting our first responders, improving traffic flow, and planning ahead so our infrastructure keeps pace with our growth.

We are also working hard to improve transportation. I have been meeting regularly with Lee County officials to address issues that directly affect Cape Coral residents, including the expansion of Burnt Store Road and the maintenance of county roads within our city limits, such as Del Prado Boulevard and the section of Cape Coral Parkway from Del Prado to the bridge. In addition, we are working with the Florida Department of Transportation to explore options to accelerate the widening of portions of State Road 78/Pine Island Road. These partnerships are important to keep our roads safe, well-maintained, and ready for the future.

Looking ahead, City Council and staff will be focused on two major efforts: developing the Fiscal Year 2027 budget and updating the City's Strategic Plan. Together, these will set the vision and priorities for Cape Coral, guide how we invest your tax dollars, and help us plan for long-term needs in areas like public safety, transportation, utilities, and parks. Your input and engagement will be important as we work through these discussions in the months ahead.

Cape Coral is also continuing to grow as a destination for sports and tourism. Recently, our city hosted the Zimmer Biomet Cape Coral Open PPA Pickleball Tournament, which brought professional players and visitors from across the country. Events like this support our local economy, highlight our recreation facilities, and show that Cape Coral can successfully host national events.

Economic development is another key focus. We continue to see strong interest from businesses that want to invest in Cape Coral, and I hope to share some exciting news soon about new projects and opportunities that will bring jobs and expand our economic base.

Thank you for your continued support and for being an active part of this community. Together, we will keep Cape Coral moving forward as a safe, strong, and thriving city for everyone.

Warm regards,

John Gunter, Cape Coral Mayor

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Wow, time is moving so fast, and as we move into spring I hear the Lord saying it's time to spring up in every area of our lives. Spring is the season when dead-looking ground suddenly produces life. What looked buried, what looked dormant, what looked over begins to rise.

The Bible declares in Ecclesiastes 3:1, "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." Just as winter does not last forever, neither does stagnation, delay, or spiritual dryness. This is your season to shake off what was and spring up into what God has purposed for your life. "Get up. It's your season."

We have to believe and declare that God's love will spring up and cover a multitude of sins. It's time for the people of God to spring up! Not just shout. Not just attend church. But to rise spiritually. We've been saved, but are we growing, loving, serving, encouraging and witnessing the way God wants us to.

It's time to rise in our homes, in our churches, in our communities, and in this nation. Let forgiveness spring up where bitterness tries to take root. Let unity spring up where division once stood. Let courage spring up where fear attempts to paralyze us.

The Word reminds us in Ecclesiastes that there is a season for everything. If there was a season of weeping, there is also a season of rejoicing. If there was a season of tearing down, there is now a season for building up. We cannot afford to stay spiritually asleep when God is calling us higher.

Do not let the past define your new season. Do not let disappointment silence your praise. The same God who brings blossoms out of barren branches is able to bring restoration, renewal, and revival to every dry place in our lives. So get up. Shake off discouragement. Shake off complacency. Shake off fear. This is not the time to sit back, this is the time to spring up.

It's your season. And if we answer the call, we will see not just individual growth, but a nation refreshed, restored, and revived springing up in every area of life for the glory of God.

With Love,

Pastor Demetrius Thomas

St. Mary Baptist Church of Punta Gorda



*Pastor Demetrius Thomas
St. Mary Baptist Church
of Punta Gorda*

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Councilwoman Teresa Watkins Brown Leads on Utilities and Infrastructure Issues

Councilwoman Teresa Watkins Brown is serving in a prominent statewide leadership role as chairperson of the Utilities, Natural Resources, and Public Works Committee for the Florida League of Cities, where she is helping guide policy discussions that affect municipalities across Florida.

The Florida League of Cities represents hundreds of cities, towns, and villages throughout the state, advocating for local decision-making authority and providing research, training, and policy guidance to municipal officials. As chair of one of its key committees, Watkins Brown plays a central role in shaping the League's positions on issues ranging from water infrastructure to solid waste management and environmental stewardship.

In her role as chairperson, Watkins Brown works with municipal leaders from across Florida to review proposed legislation, analyze regulatory changes, and develop recommendations that reflect the needs of local governments. The Utilities, Natural Resources, and Public Works Committee focuses on core services that residents rely on every day, including drinking water systems, wastewater treatment, stormwater management, energy delivery, road maintenance, and public facilities.

Colleagues within the League describe the committee's work as particularly important at a time when Florida's cities are facing rapid population growth, aging infrastructure, and increasing environmental pressures.

Water quality and supply remain major priorities statewide, especially in coastal and rapidly developing communities.

The committee also tracks state and federal funding opportunities that can help cities modernize infrastructure and strengthen resilience against storms and flooding.

Watkins Brown's leadership involves coordinating meetings, setting agendas, and facilitating discussions among city officials with differing perspectives and regional priorities. The committee reviews bills introduced during the legislative session that could impact municipal utilities or public works operations. Based on those reviews, it may recommend positions to the League's legislative leadership, helping inform the organization's advocacy efforts in Tallahassee.

Beyond legislative review, the committee also serves as a forum for sharing best practices. Municipal leaders discuss strategies for upgrading aging water lines, investing in renewable energy technologies, improving waste reduction programs, and strengthening emergency response systems. These exchanges allow cities to learn from one another and replicate successful programs in their own communities.

Watkins Brown's work with the League complements her service at the local level, where she engages with residents on infrastructure concerns and community development priorities. Public works and utilities are often among the most visible and



Utilities, Natural Resources, and Public Works Committee

Chair

Teresa Watkins Brown

Councilmember, City of Fort Myers



resource-intensive responsibilities of city government. From ensuring reliable trash collection to maintaining safe roadways and managing water systems, these services form the backbone of daily municipal operations.

The chairperson role also requires balancing environmental protection with economic development. Florida's natural resources—including its aquifers, wetlands, rivers, and coastlines—are critical to both quality of life and the state's tourism-driven economy. Policies affecting land use, water withdrawals, stormwater runoff, and infrastructure construction can have long-term environmental and fiscal implications for local governments.

In recent years, cities have increasingly focused on resilience planning as they contend with more frequent severe weather events. Infrastructure hardening, flood mitigation projects, and updated building standards have become common topics of discussion within the League. The Utilities, Natural Resources, and Public Works Committee provides a structured venue for evaluating these approaches and considering how state policies align with local needs.

As chair, Watkins Brown represents municipal interests in conversations with state lawmakers, agency officials, and other stakeholders. While the League itself does not pass laws, its recommendations can influence policy debates by conveying the collective concerns of Florida's cities.

Supporters note that the role demands both technical understanding and collaborative leadership, given the complexity of utility systems and the diversity of communities represented. The committee's work spans small rural towns and large urban centers, each with distinct infrastructure challenges. Looking ahead, infrastructure funding, water quality initiatives, and regulatory changes are expected to remain key issues for municipalities across Florida. Through her leadership position with the Florida League of Cities, Councilwoman Teresa Watkins Brown continues to participate in shaping how local governments respond to those challenges and deliver essential services to residents statewide.



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BY MCKINLEY G. WILLIAMS

We all know that investing is one of the most important steps a person can make towards achieving long-term financial security and peace of mind in retirement. One unique investment vehicle that can be used by beginners and professional investors is Unit Investment Trust. Unit Investment Trusts (UITs) stand out as a structured, transparent, and disciplined option for investors seeking diversification and professional portfolio construction. Whether you are a rookie to investing or looking to expand an existing portfolio, understanding the benefits of investing in a Unit Investment Trust can help you make more informed financial decisions.

A Unit Investment Trust is a type of investment company regulated under the Investment Company Act of 1940.

Unlike actively managed mutual funds, UITs typically follow a fixed strategy. When a UIT is created, a sponsor assembles a portfolio of securities—such as stocks or bonds—that remains largely unchanged for the life of the trust. Investors purchase “units,” which represent an undivided interest in the entire portfolio. This structure offers several distinct advantages. One of the most significant benefits of investing in a UIT is diversification. Diversification reduces risk by spreading investments across multiple securities rather than concentrating capital in a single asset.

For example, a UIT may hold dozens of bonds from different issuers or stocks from various industries. This approach helps mitigate the impact of poor performance from any one security. For individual investors who may not have the capital to build a diversified portfolio on their own, a UIT (Unit Investment Trust) provides access to broad market exposure in a single purchase. Another key advantage is professional selection. UIT portfolios are assembled by experienced financial professionals who conduct research and analysis before selecting the underlying securities.

While the portfolio is not actively managed once established, the initial selection is based on specific investment objectives—such as income generation, capital appreciation, or sector-focused growth. This professional oversight can provide investors with confidence that their investments are chosen

according to a disciplined strategy. Transparency is another notable benefit of UITs. Because the portfolio is generally fixed, investors know exactly which securities they own throughout the life of the trust. Unlike some actively managed funds that frequently buy and sell holdings, UITs provide clarity and predictability.

Investors can review the trust’s holdings at any time and understand how their money is allocated. This transparency fosters trust and allows for better long-term planning. Cost efficiency is also an important consideration. While UITs may have initial sales charges, they typically have lower ongoing management fees compared to actively managed mutual funds. Since the portfolio does not require frequent trading or active management decisions, operating expenses can be reduced. Over time, lower expenses may enhance net returns for investors.

Another appealing feature of UITs is their defined maturity date. Most UITs are established with a specific termination date, which can range from a few months to several years. At maturity, the trust is dissolved and proceeds are distributed to investors. This defined time horizon can be particularly attractive to investors with specific financial goals, such as saving for a child’s education or planning for retirement income. The structured timeline provides clarity about when funds will become available.

Income generation is another important benefit, especially for conservative investors.

Bond-focused UITs, in particular, can offer predictable income streams. By holding a portfolio of bonds with known interest payments, a UIT may provide regular distributions to investors. This can be especially beneficial during periods of market volatility when consistent income becomes a priority.

Additionally, equity-based UITs may focus on dividend-paying stocks, offering potential income alongside capital

appreciation. Tax efficiency may also be advantageous in certain cases. Because UITs typically do not engage in frequent trading, they may generate fewer capital gains distributions compared to actively managed funds.

This lower turnover can result in fewer taxable events for investors, which may help improve after-tax returns. However, tax implications vary depending on individual circumstances, and investors should consult a tax professional for personalized advice. Simplicity is another reason investors choose UITs. The fixed portfolio and buy-and-hold strategy reduce complexity.

Investors are not required to monitor frequent changes in holdings or adjust to shifting management strategies. This simplicity can be particularly valuable for individuals who prefer a more hands-off investment approach. Furthermore, UITs offer a wide range of investment themes and strategies. Investors can select trusts focused on blue-chip stocks, municipal bonds, corporate bonds, international equities, or specific sectors such as technology or healthcare.

This variety enables investors to tailor their portfolios to align with personal risk tolerance, income needs, and long-term objectives. While UITs offer many benefits, it is important to consider potential limitations. Because the portfolio is generally fixed, UITs do not adapt to changing market conditions. If a particular security underperforms, it may remain in the portfolio until maturity. Additionally, early redemption of units may involve costs or market risk.

Nevertheless, for investors who value structure, transparency, and diversification, these trade-offs may be acceptable. In a nutshell, investing in a Unit Investment Trust can provide numerous advantages, including diversification, professional selection, transparency, cost efficiency, defined maturity, income potential, and simplicity. For individuals seeking a disciplined and structured investment vehicle, UITs offer a compelling option. As with any investment, careful consideration of financial goals, risk tolerance, and time horizon is essential. By understanding the benefits of UITs, investors can make strategic choices that contribute to long-term financial growth and stability.

***Remember to ALWAYS check with your financial advisor (if you have one) to stay on track of your defined financial goals.*

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An Open Letter to the Newspaper Editor for the People of Charlotte County

Dear Friends and Neighbors of Charlotte County,



We need to talk about something very important. It is not a storm. It is not a fire. It is not something loud or fast. It is the lack of rain.

Right now, our county is facing a serious drought. That means we have not had enough rain for a long time. The ground is dry. The grass is turning brown. Ponds and canals are lower than they should be. The water we depend on every day is slowly shrinking.

Because of this, stricter water restrictions are now in place across Charlotte County. These rules are not meant to punish anyone. They are meant to protect all of us.

Water is something we use every single day. We use it to drink. We use it to cook. We use it to shower and wash our hands. Farmers use it to grow food. Firefighters use it to keep us safe. Hospitals use it to care for people. Without water, our daily lives would stop.

Many people think of Florida as a very wet place. We think about summer rainstorms and big clouds rolling in from the Gulf of Mexico. We remember heavy rain hitting our roofs and filling up the streets.

But this year has been different.

The rain has not come like it usually does. Week after week, the clouds pass by without giving us what we need. The sun keeps shining. The heat keeps rising. And the water levels keep dropping.

Drought can be hard to see at first. It does not crash into town like a hurricane. It does not knock down trees or break windows. It is quiet. It happens slowly.

But it is serious.

When there is not enough rain, the water in our lakes and canals goes down. The water underground, called groundwater, also drops. This is the water that fills many of our wells and supplies our homes. When it gets too low, it can cause big problems.

That is why county leaders have decided we must use less water for now. Under the new restrictions, there will be fewer days when you can water your lawn. You may only be allowed to water on certain days and at certain times. Washing driveways with a hose may not be allowed. Letting sprinklers run too long is not allowed. Car washing may need to be done with a shut-off nozzle. These rules may feel frustrating. You may look at your lawn and worry about brown spots. You may miss watering whenever you want.

But please remember: grass can grow back. Our water supply is much harder to replace.

If we do not act now, the rules could become even stricter later. We could face emergency limits. Water pressure could drop. Some services could be affected. Acting early helps prevent bigger problems.

Every single person in Charlotte County can help.

You can check your faucets for leaks. A small drip may not seem like much, but over time it wastes gallons and gallons of water. You can turn off the tap while brushing your teeth. You can take shorter showers. You can run the dishwasher and washing machine only when they are full.

Outside, you can water only on allowed days. You can water early in the morning so less water is lost to the hot sun. You can plant flowers and plants that need less water. You can sweep your driveway instead of spraying it with a hose.

Small actions add up.

If one family saves a few gallons a day, it may not seem like much. But when thousands of families do the same thing, it becomes millions of gallons saved. That is water that stays in our system. That is water that helps protect our future.

Drought also affects nature. Fish and

birds depend on healthy water levels. When freshwater gets too low, saltwater from the coast can move farther inland. This can harm plants and animals. It can change habitats. It can hurt the beauty that makes our county special.

We all love living near the coast. We enjoy the beaches and warm breezes from the Gulf of Mexico. We enjoy our parks and natural spaces. Taking care of our water helps protect all of it.

It is easy to think, "My water use does not matter." But it does. Every drop matters right now.

The good news is this: drought does not last forever. The rain will return. Storm clouds will build again. The ground will soak up the water. Lakes and canals will rise.

But until that happens, we must work together.

Our county has faced hard times before. We have prepared for hurricanes. We have cleaned up after storms. We have helped our neighbors when they needed it most. This is another moment when we must stand together.

Using less water is a simple but powerful way to show we care about our community.

These restrictions are not about fear. They are about responsibility. They are about making sure that every home has safe drinking water. They are about protecting firefighters' ability to respond to emergencies. They are about keeping our county strong.

Please take the new water rules seriously. Follow the schedule. Fix leaks quickly. Talk to your children about why saving water is important. Set an example for others.

If we all do our part, we can get through this dry season without deeper problems. We can protect our homes, our neighbors, and our beautiful corner of Florida.

The ground may be dry right now. The sun may feel stronger. But our community is stronger still.

Let us save water. Let us be careful. Let us work together until the rain comes back to Charlotte County.

Sincerely,
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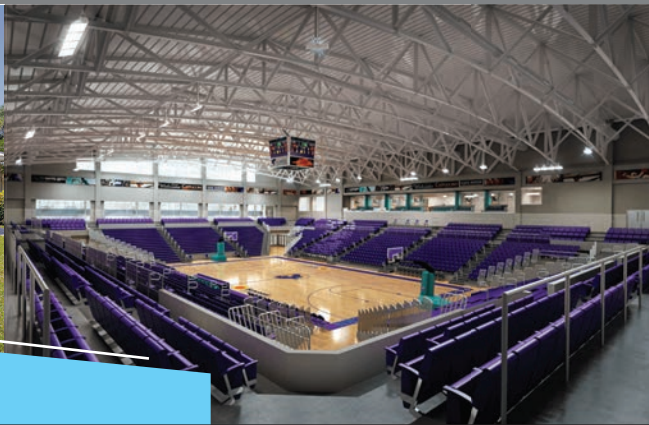
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PROPERTY THEFT: A GROWING THREAT TO PROPERTY OWNERS



Dear Real Estate Investor's Professionals & Property Owners,

We are expanding on an article we originally published in Summer 2025 in the East Lee County News because this issue continues to accelerate. Across Lee County and throughout Florida, fraudulent individuals are posing as property owners in attempts to steal land and homes. These scammers create fake email accounts, forge identification documents, and impersonate legitimate owners — and it is happening with alarming frequency.

Due to the high volume of real estate transactions, the high volume of unoccupied properties, and the state's minimal recording requirements, Florida ranks as a hotspot for property theft.

Realestate professionals are often the first line of defense. By taking simple but critical precautions when responding to lead calls or email inquiries, we can help prevent fraudulent transactions before they gain momentum. Title companies also play an essential role and should require verified proof of identity before moving forward with escrow or closing preparations.

Simply looking up a recorded deed is not enough. A deed confirms who the owner of record should be — it does not verify that the person you are communicating with is actually that individual. By the time a fraudulent deed is recorded with the Clerk's Office, significant damage may already have occurred. Prevention must happen earlier in the process.

RECOMMENDATION: require visual identity verification from any individual seeking to list a property. This small but intentional step can significantly reduce risk.

Electronic listing agreements are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Extra caution and identity verification should always precede sending digital documents for signature.

A RECENT EXAMPLE

Last summer, we helped stop a fraudulent listing attempt. A "FAKE client" contacted us requesting a property evaluation and listing services. The email address matched the name shown in county property records, and at first glance, everything

appeared legitimate.

Our broker, Darius Cochran, evaluated the property and provided a proposed listing price. The "FAKE" owner quickly requested that we send an electronic listing agreement.

However, something felt suspicious. We conducted additional due diligence through independent research. Thankfully, we were able to contact the true property owner — a kind woman who was shocked to learn that someone was attempting to sell her property without her knowledge.

Unfortunately, this was not an isolated incident. This trend is increasing.

In fact, last year the former President of the Royal Palm Coast Realtor® Association, Karen Borelli, was herself targeted when an individual attempted to fraudulently sell her personal property. A title company contacted her after noticing irregularities, prompting an investigation that ultimately stopped the illegal attempt.

WHAT IS BEING DONE

The Lee County Clerk's Office has taken meaningful steps to address this growing problem. In 2023, the Florida Legislature created the Title Fraud Prevention Through Identity Verification Pilot Program in Lee County under Florida Statutes §28.2225.

Although Florida does not require in-person ID verification when filing a deed, under this program, individuals recording a deed or similar real property instrument in Lee County must present government-issued photo identification before the Clerk will process the recording. This requirement assists law enforcement in verifying identities and may deter fraudulent filings.

The program began July 1, 2023, as a two-year pilot to evaluate its effectiveness and determine whether it should be expanded statewide.

FREE PROPERTY FRAUD ALERT SERVICE

Separately, the Clerk's Office offers a free Property Fraud Alert service. Property owners may register to receive email

Due to the high volume of real estate transactions, the high volume of unoccupied properties, and the state's minimal recording requirements, Florida ranks as a hotspot for property theft.

notifications when a deed, mortgage, or other recorded document containing their registered name or parcel ID is filed in the Official Records. Notifications are typically sent within 24–48 hours after recording.

While this service does not prevent fraud, it provides early notice so property owners can quickly investigate and involve law enforcement if necessary.

Together, the identity verification pilot program and the alert notification system aim to make fraudulent recordings more difficult and detection more immediate.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

However, even with these safeguards, alerts are triggered after a document has already been recorded. Property owners may still face legal expenses and time-consuming efforts to clear fraudulent filings.

Additionally, the Property Fraud Alert system does not currently verify that the individual registering for notifications is the

actual property owner. A fraudulent actor could potentially register a property using their own email address.

One potential improvement would be to require identity verification — similar to the pilot recording program — for individuals registering properties within the alert system.

MOVING FORWARD

We must work together to protect our clients, our businesses, and the integrity of property ownership in our community. Fraud of this nature damages trust and creates significant financial and emotional harm.

Let's remain vigilant, communicate openly, and take proactive steps to stop these crimes before they reach the closing table.

Thank you for your continued commitment to protecting our industry.

Sincerely,

Amanda Cochran, *SWFL Business Alliance*

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A Gala Story

The Third Annual Black History Month Concert Honors. Presented by Lee Pitts Live and The North Law Firm, P.A.

Another tremendous event, honoring Former Fort Myers Councilman Sergeant Johnny Streets Jr.

An evening filled with elegance, gratitude, and heartfelt tributes. The community gathered to celebrate a remarkable career at a grand honorary gala for its beloved retired Master Sergeant and Former City of Fort Myers Ward 2 Councilman.

The event, held at the stunning Franklin Park Elementary School right in the middle of the community.

Dinner was served while the amazing soulful sounds of The Shawn Brown Band provided soft background music during the reception.

It was a fitting tribute to a leader whose decades of service shaped both the police department and the city it protected while leaving an impressionable mark on many lives.

His dedicated service with The City of Fort Myers Police Department was known to be a stern leadership, but with integrity, and deep compassion for the community.

Sgt. Street's tenure was marked by meaningful enhanced community policing all while setting trail blazing initiatives such

as creating free school lunch programs for the students in the community as City Councilman.

Franklin Park Elementary auditorium came to life with The Who's Who of Fort Myers. With civic leaders, longtime friends, family and grateful residents.

The voices rang proud telling heartfelt stories of moments of how Sgt Street's touched their lives. While the most profound, empowering story coming from Sgt Street's own daughter, Terry Baah-Acheanfour.

As the evening progressed, the crowd mingled and gathered for red carpet photos and interviews by the beautiful Tisha and Toya of What's Going on with Tisha and Toya of Lee Pitts Live.

The lights dimmed on another elegant evening of music, laughter, lights cameras and honors, and as the Lee Pitts saying goes, "Miami has the oranges but Sgt Johnny Street has the Juice".

A beautiful honorary gala celebrates a lifetime of service.

Thank you Sgt Street's for your years of service and contributions to the City of Fort Myers.

And thank you Lee Pitts and The North Law Firm, P.A. for honoring us.





Statewide Change in Driver's License Testing Policy

On February 6, 2026, the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (FLHSMV) implemented a significant change in how driver's license exams are administered statewide. Under the new requirement, all driver's license knowledge and skills examinations — written, oral, and practical — must now be conducted exclusively in English. Translation services, printed exams in languages other than English, and interpreter assistance are no longer permitted during testing.

Previously, Florida offered exams in multiple languages for many non-commercial license applicants, and Spanish was available for commercial licenses. With this shift, every applicant seeking a driver's license, from learner's permits to commercial credentials, must now demonstrate understanding in English to complete the licensing process.

State officials have said the rationale for the policy is to ensure consistent comprehension of traffic laws, road signs, safety instructions, and communication with law enforcement. They argue that since most road signage and official communications on Florida roads are in English, exams should reflect that reality. Supporters of the policy, including some state leaders, see it as a safety measure and a way to standardize testing across the state.

However, this change has also sparked debate — with critics saying it creates new barriers for immigrants and residents who speak limited English, and could lead to a rise in unlicensed drivers if people are unable to pass the tests without language support.

In Bonita Springs, Florida, the policy change has had tangible local effects — particularly among non-English speaking residents who need to pass the English-only driver's exams to obtain or renew their licenses. For many residents in this diverse area of Southwest Florida, access to driver's licenses is

essential for employment, education, healthcare access, and day-to-day life due to limited public transportation. The change has placed additional pressure on individuals who previously relied on translated tests or language support.

Recognizing this challenge, the Gulf Coast Literacy Council (GCLC), a non-profit literacy organization based in Bonita Springs that already provides English language learning programs, responded by developing new specialized classes focused specifically on preparing non-English speakers for the driver's license exam.

According to Leah Mason, the executive director of GCLC, the organization has long offered English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and other literacy support. But the new English-only testing requirement prompted the council to start planning a dedicated driver's test preparation course almost immediately following the announcement of the policy change. They expect to roll out the new class within about a month.

The classes are designed to help students not only improve general English proficiency but also focus on the specific vocabulary, grammar, and test formats used in the official driver's examination. Students will practice understanding the written rules of the road, road signs, and typical test questions — all in English — to better position them to succeed once they take the exam.

Another part of the council's response has been listening to community needs. Staff and volunteers observed firsthand how the policy affected existing students and residents, and saw increased inquiries from people seeking assistance preparing for the new requirements. GCLC's program leaders emphasize that these efforts are meant to bridge the gap — helping students build confidence and language skills rather than simply teaching rote test-taking.

Among local residents, there are varied views on the policy. Students currently enrolled in the literacy council's general English programs report feeling both the urgency and value of language learning. For example, Isabel Toledo, a Guatemalan native who learned English through the council's programs and now works there, says free classes help remove financial barriers for people striving to succeed under the new requirement.

At the same time, some community members express concern about the fairness of requiring English only for driver's tests. Critics argue that road safety depends on understanding traffic signs and safe driving practices — many of which rely on symbol recognition rather than written English proficiency — and that the policy could disadvantage capable drivers simply because of language barriers. Others worry that individuals who cannot pass the test in English may choose to drive without a license, increasing risks of fines, lack of insurance, or legal issues.

Local advocates also point out that Florida's population includes many immigrants, seasonal workers, and long-time residents whose first language is not English; previously available multilingual exams helped lower obstacles to licensing for these communities. The sudden removal of those options has required rapid adjustments by service providers, community organizations, and residents themselves.

The policy shift in Florida has come amid broader discussions about language, integration, and public safety. Beyond driver's license exams, there are ongoing debates in the

state legislature around immigration enforcement and public service requirements. For example, the Florida Senate has moved forward on proposals related to immigration and law enforcement responsibilities, though not directly tied to driver licensing.

State officials maintain the policy is intended to enhance communication and safety on Florida's roads, while opponents describe it as an unnecessary barrier that places undue burdens on non-English speakers. Regardless of these positions, the tangible consequence is clear: non-English speaking Floridians must now demonstrate English proficiency to obtain a license, and local groups like the Gulf Coast Literary Council are stepping up to provide critical educational support. As the policy continues to take effect, the response from nonprofit groups, educators, and community advocates will likely shape the long-term outcomes for multilingual communities in places like Bonita Springs. Whether additional support services, extended training programs, or policy revisions emerge will depend on community needs, advocacy efforts, and state-level discussions going forward.

In the meantime, organizations like the Gulf Coast Literary Council are at the forefront — offering tailored resources to help residents adapt to a major change in how Floridians pursue one of the most basic, everyday milestones of independence: earning a driver's license.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING PT 3



Saturday, March 7, 2026

9:00 Registration & Networking

9:30 Program Starts

Collaboratory: 2031 Jackson Street, Fort Myers 33901 & Virtual Via Zoom

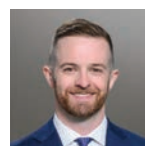
No Place Like Home

Why affordable housing is falling short and what our community can do about it

by the League of Women Voters of Lee County | lwvlee.org

Affordable and attainable housing continues to be a critical need in Lee County, especially for the most vulnerable populations, those without the resources to recover. The League of Women Voters believes every family deserves a decent home and a suitable living environment. The League supports governing that provides leadership and coordination to solve economic and social issues and assures needed services to all citizens.

Speakers will reveal data about the gaps in affordable housing for middle to low income residents, barriers to building housing that is affordable, and solutions that have the potential to increase the amount of units that are affordable for individuals experiencing housing stress, and spending over 30% of their income on housing.



Lowell Atkinson, Policy Analyst, Florida Housing Coalition serves on the Florida Housing Coalition's Affordable Housing Development team, where he helps manage the Predevelopment Loan Program.



Lois Healy, CEO, Affordable Homeownership Foundation brings more than a decade of experience in housing counseling, financial coaching, and affordable mortgage lending to her work.

Following the presentations, there will be opportunities for audience participation and questions.

Information and Registration:

Registration link: <https://LWVLeeAffordableHousingUpdate.eventbrite.com> | **Email:** lwvlee@lwvlee.org

The “Picket Fence” of Profits:

CORRUPTION IN COLLIER’S 5G ROLLOUT

The rapid industrialization of the Atlantic Flyway via 5G towers is not a biological accident; it is a systemic failure of governance. As high-intensity electromagnetic radiation (EMR) creates a “picket fence” across our county, the public must ask why advisory boards meant to protect our land are instead fast-tracking its degradation.

The answer lies in the deep-seated conflicts of interest within the Collier County Planning Commission (CCPC) and the Development Services Advisory Committee (DSAC).

THE ARCHITECT-DEVELOPER LOOP

A review of the DSAC roster reveals a committee dominated by the very industries profiting from tower expansion and eastward sprawl. When #WilliamVarian (General Contractor), #JeffreyCurl (Landscape Architect), and #NicholasKouloheras (Developer) sit in judgment of Land Development Code (LDC) amendments, they are not neutral arbiters. They are industry representatives ensuring that “operational efficiency”—shorthand for faster permits—remains the priority over ecological due diligence.

PROFESSIONAL ENTANGLEMENT

On the Planning Commission, the line between public service and private gain is equally blurred. Commissioners like #RandallSparrazza, #CharlesColucci, and #ChuckSchumacher are tasked with reviewing “Conditional Use” permits for towers required only because of the massive rezonings they previously recommended for approval.

Special attention must be paid to the “Environmental” seats. While #PaulShea has occasionally shown dissent, the overall body, including #JosephSchmitt and #MarcoEspinara, operates within a framework that treats the Big Cypress National Preserve and the Estates as “infill” opportunities rather than delicate ecosystems.

THE RESULT: INSTITUTIONALIZED DISREGARD

When #MichelleMcLeod or #MichaelPetscher vote to forward a 5G petition to the BCCC, they validate a system that ignores mounting evidence of EMR’s threat to wildlife. These advisory boards have the power to recommend the modernized LDC standards we desperately need: mandatory co-location, bird-friendly lighting, and self-supporting monopoles.

Instead, they maintain a status quo that benefits their professional peers. By the time these permits reach commissioners like Bill McDaniel, Chris Hall, and Dan Kowal—who are already flush with developer contributions—the “environmental review” is a mere rubber stamp. Until we demand a Planning Commission free from industry entanglement, Collier County’s sky will continue to be sold to the highest bidder.

Bebe Kanter (Barbara Bruckenstein) is the CEO and founder of Quiet Collier, Inc., an organization advocating for noise mitigation, environmental justice, and local accountability. A highly engaged civic leader in Naples, she holds a Master’s degree in City Planning from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design and is an alumna of Barnard College. Her work focuses on leveraging 35 years of professional experience in land use and communication to challenge the rapid industrialization of Southwest Florida’s natural corridors.





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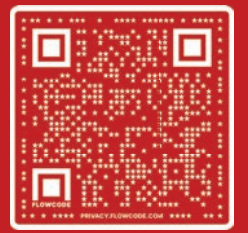
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SAM FISHER CAMPAIGN KICKOFF





Learning to Enjoy the *Moment*

BY VERNON BROWN
THE DUNBAR SHADETREE PHD.

**The *truth* is, love does not *live* in
yesterday. It does not *thrive* in
tomorrow. It *breathes* in the now.**

My Friend,

There is something I want to share with you, not as advice from a pedestal, but as a quiet truth learned through time and reflection: learn to embrace the present moment with the one you love. It sounds simple, almost obvious, yet it is one of the hardest lessons for any of us to truly live.

We spend so much of our lives leaning forward. We plan, we anticipate, we worry, we strategize. Even in love, we are often thinking ahead—about where the relationship is going, what the next milestone will be, whether it will last, whether we are doing it “right.” In doing so, we unintentionally step away from the only place where love can actually exist: the present moment.

The truth is, love does not live in yesterday. It does not thrive in tomorrow. It breathes in the now.

When you are with the person you love, really be there. Not half-distracted by your phone. Not mentally drafting tomorrow’s to-do list. Not replaying an argument from last week. Be present enough to notice the subtle things—the way their eyes brighten when they talk about something that matters to them, the rhythm of their laughter, the comfort in shared silence.

Those details are not small. They are the substance of a life together.

It is easy to assume there will always be more time. More dinners. More walks. More conversations. More chances to say what you mean. But time has a way of moving quietly and quickly all at once. Days blur into months, and months into years. One day you may look back and realize that the moments you rushed through were the very ones you now long to revisit.

Embracing the present does not mean ignoring the future. It means refusing to sacrifice today for a hypothetical tomorrow. It means understanding that what you are building together is not just a destination, but a collection of ordinary, sacred moments stacked gently upon one another.

When you sit across from the one you love, let your attention

rest there. Listen without preparing your reply. Touch their hand without agenda. Speak honestly, even if your voice shakes a little. Allow yourself to experience joy without immediately questioning how long it will last.

So often we sabotage happiness by trying to secure it. We grip it too tightly. We analyze it. We test it. Instead, try letting it unfold. Let laughter be laughter. Let affection be affection. Let an ordinary Tuesday evening be enough.

There will be challenges. There will be misunderstandings, disappointments, and days when patience feels thin. Embracing the present does not mean pretending everything is perfect. It means addressing what is real without dragging in ghosts from the past or fears from the future. It means asking, “What is needed right now?” instead of “What does this mean forever?” Right now, perhaps what is needed is a kind word. Or forgiveness. Or simply sitting together without trying to solve everything.

When you learn to live this way, something remarkable happens. The relationship softens. It becomes less about performance and more about connection. You stop trying to win every disagreement. You stop keeping score. You begin to appreciate the simple miracle of sharing your days with another imperfect, beautiful human being.

Think of how many people in this world are longing for exactly what you may already have—a hand to hold, a voice that says “I’m here,” a presence that feels like home. Gratitude is one of the purest forms of presence. When you allow yourself to truly appreciate the person beside you, you naturally slow down. You pay attention. You care more deeply.

Do not wait for grand gestures to validate your love. It is not the vacations, the anniversaries, or the photographs that sustain a bond. It is the small, consistent acts of being there. The way you look up when they enter the room. The way you ask about their day and truly want to know. The way you choose kindness when irritation would be easier.

next page →

If you ever find yourself drifting—caught in worry about where things are headed—pause. Look at them. Notice that they are here with you now. That is the gift. The rest is unwritten.

Life has a way of humbling us. It reminds us that control is limited, that certainty is fragile. But it also offers us moments of astonishing tenderness if we are willing to receive them. Love, when experienced fully in the present, is not anxious. It is steady. It is attentive. It is generous.

Tell them what you appreciate today, not someday. Apologize when you need to, without waiting for the “right time.” Celebrate small victories. Laugh often. Forgive quickly. Hold each other without rushing away.

The present moment may seem ordinary, but it is where intimacy deepens. It is where trust is built. It is where memories quietly form, often without you realizing their significance until much later.

One day, you will look back—not at the elaborate plans or the future you once imagined—but at the evenings spent talking, the quiet mornings side by side, the comfort of simply knowing someone was there. Those memories will not be made in some distant tomorrow. They are being created right now.

So choose to inhabit this moment

fully. Let your love be expressed in attention. Let your commitment be shown in presence. Let your gratitude shape the way you move through your days together.

In the end, embracing the present with the one you love is not just about preserving a relationship. It is about honoring the fleeting, precious nature of life itself. It is about recognizing that this—this conversation, this shared breath, this simple togetherness—is the point.

With sincerity and hope that you will treasure what is already in your hands, Vernon



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Meet Stephanie Howard!

President and CEO of All About Closing Inc., Stephanie is a licensed title professional with nearly 30 years of experience in the real estate and title industry. Her deep expertise, leadership, & commitment to excellence have made her a trusted name in helping clients navigate even the most complex closings with confidence and ease. Under her direction, All About Closing continues to set the standard for professionalism, accuracy, and customer care in the title business.