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Fairness and credibility lacking at Sheriff's Office

Two vital elements were noticeably missing from the Sheriff's Office's Internal Affairs investigation of three trumped-up allegations made against now-Capt. Milo Thornton, who was demoted and reassigned with a pay cut despite being cleared of any policy violations.

Fairness.

And credibility.

Anyone who has read the nearly 300-page IA report released to the public last week will see that Thornton was not afforded any semblance of due process throughout the two-month investigation of allegations that he created an "extremely hostile" work environment at the jail.

He was suspended with pay immediately upon the launch of the investigation – a decision based solely on questionable complaints from disgruntled subordinates. He was never afforded the opportunity to confront his accusers or respond

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PHOTO: CHUCKPALMERPHOTOS.COM

Decision deferred on future of Archie Smith Fish House site

BY RAY McNULTY
Staff Writer

More than two decades have passed since the 90-year-old Archie Smith Fish House property, located on east side

of Indian River Drive at the north end of Sebastian, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and nature has not been kind.

By this time next year, the county-owned 1.15-acre site's

last remaining building – the so-called "residence" on the Indian River Lagoon's shoreline – could be history.

County commissioners last week postponed a decision

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Better way needed to deal with Baker Act admissions

BY MICHELLE GENZ
Staff Writer

The first court hearing is likely not the last in the case of the shooting death by sheriff's deputies of a mental health patient at Cleveland Clinic Indian River Hospital.

The hospital system is seeking an injunction against the Indian River County sheriff's department to keep the sheriff from publicly releasing the hospital's security camera video of the incident, as the sheriff is eager to do.

The sheriff, who obtained the video through a subpoena along with the patient's clinical medical records, believes it exonerates his two SWAT team deputies who shot the patient as he came at them with a pair of scissors a month ago.

In addition to the hearing this week, a grand jury is expected to review the deputies' actions to see if state laws

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John's Island Foundation brings in record \$1.1 million to fund grants

BY MARY SCHENKEL
Staff Writer

The John's Island Foundation raised a record \$1.1 million from its philanthropic membership this year and thus was able to not only ful-

fill, but in fact double, one of its largest grants ever.

Grant co-chairs Francie Cramb and Margie Wheeler posit the increase in donations by John's Island residents to their grasp of the devastat-

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Vero radiologist celebrates quarter of a century as organ recipient

BY LISA ZAHNER
Staff Writer

Dr. John Hoffmann, a radiologist at Vero Radiology Associates, was in college a quarter of a century ago when he was added to the long list of people in need of a new liver.

"I was born with an enlarged



Dr. John Hoffmann. PHOTO BY KAILA JONES

liver and abnormal liver enzymes. I was followed for a few months until things normalized. Then when I was 13, undergoing an entrance physical for high school, it was noted my liver enzymes were elevated," Hoffmann said. Eight years later, after countless tests and

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Moorings team raises \$877K for 'Habitat.' P28

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They didn't, of course. Flowers doesn't interact one-on-one with news-media members he doesn't consider friendly. Instead, he controls the agency's message through sharply produced videos released through social media, dodging the efforts of those of us trying to hold him accountable. My guess is, his desire to control the message also factored into his decision to replace the lieutenant who previously oversaw the IA division, which

is supposed to conduct investigations without influence from above.

Don't you find it odd that Flowers dispatched Raulen, who filed the formal complaint that launched the investigation, to inform Thornton of his suspension – and, later, to notify him of the new allegations – rather than confront him face to face?

Is that what real leaders do?

As for my questions, I was especially looking forward to getting Flowers' response to this one, regarding Thornton's reassignment:

Why did you choose to assign to the newly created School Safety Division

– and place in an environment where interaction with students is likely, if not necessary – someone who other high-ranking deputies described as arrogant, hostile, undermining, dismissive and rude?

I also asked: What was lacking in the evidence and/or testimony given during the investigation that prevented the allegations made against Thornton from being sustained?

What was the overall impact on the conditions and operations at the jail during Thornton's time as supervisor? And following up on Flowers' claim – in his April 5 letter informing Thornton of his demotion – that he had “attempted to coach and counsel” him on interacting with employees, I asked how, when and in what setting those counseling and coaching sessions took place.

To be sure, I'd also like to know why Flowers didn't allow Thornton to respond to the complaints that prompted the sheriff to demote him.

Again, I don't expect an answer.

But you should.

In his letter to Thornton, Flowers wrote that based on his review of the IA case: “I have lost faith in your ability to lead at the Deputy Chief level.”

That makes no sense, given the sus-

pect nature of this case, which was based on complaints from shaky sources and allegations that couldn't be proven.

Flowers' loss of faith in Thornton's ability to lead also should raise eyebrows, given his contention that we shouldn't lose faith in his ability to lead the Sheriff's Office in the wake of the public apology he offered after his marital infidelity was exposed in February.

At the very least, it's hypocritical of Flowers to not extend to Thornton the same spirit of understanding and forgiveness he asked of his wife, his agency and the community.

It should surprise no one that Flowers, despite being politically wounded by the extramarital affair, announced last week his intention to seek re-election in 2024.

Could his desire to keep the job have prompted the allegations against Thornton, who, according to local law enforcement sources, Flowers considers a potential challenger in that sheriff's race?

This Internal Affairs report, which lacks the fairness and credibility we should expect from our Sheriff's Office, does nothing to quiet such suspicions.

Too much of it reads like a negative campaign ad. ■



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John's Island grants

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ing impact the pandemic continues to have on lower-income families, particularly the increasing scarcity of affordable housing in Indian River County.

Therefore, when a \$100,000 grant request came in from the Coalition for Attainable Homes to build a 3,300-square-foot triplex in Gifford, on land donated by the county, the foundation knew it could make a difference. With two three-bedroom/two bath units, and one two-bedroom/one bath unit, the triplex will house three families.

The project is being overseen by two women who for years have tackled the affordable housing crisis in Indian River County: Julianne Price, president of the Coalition for Attainable Homes, was a founding member of Every Dream Has a Price, which merged with the Coalition; and Louise Hubbard, the longtime executive director of the Treasure Coast Homeless Services Council, who wrote the grant request on behalf of the coalition.

“They took us to the plot it was going to be built on, and then drove us around to one or two of their other houses, and we all realized the opportunity here,” said Cramb. “We looked at this project and we realized that the John's Island Foundation had the opportunity, because we had generous

donors and considerable funds, to make a real impact.”

Knowing that Price and Hubbard would have to go elsewhere to fund contingency fees and outfit the inside, they received board approval to increase the grant to \$200,000.

“That is the biggest we've ever granted. But these two women are working so hard right now, with placing people who have been evicted,” said Wheeler. “The right thing was to really help them with this project.”

Because of its uniqueness, the John's Island Foundation board agreed that it should be an entirely separate grant entity.

The new McCabe Leadership Grant is named in honor of the late visionary philanthropist Eleonora (Ellie) McCabe, who in 1999, seeing that no funders were addressing agency capital expenditures, founded the John's Island Foundation. This new grant will be used for special mission-based projects with a significant impact and long-term benefits.

“The John's Island Foundation has come up with the most support we've ever received for development of affordable housing in this county. We've never gotten that kind of money from local foundations,” said Hubbard. “This is a project that's a local commitment to doing something for this community that comes from their efforts.”

“It's a partnership, because Every Dream and Homeless Services Coun-

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cil has worked with them for years," added Price.

"It does help that it is a public-private partnership. That's the big part," said Wheeler. She added that because of past relationships, they trusted that Price and Hubbard would be good stewards of the funds provided to them.

Among the other 25 agency grants provided this year, the Arc of Indian River County received a larger than usual \$75,000 grant to construct a pavilion at its west campus for its day program.

"I realize it's not housing per se, but COVID exposed all the incredible weaknesses that agencies here have been trying to tread carefully," said Cramb, noting that the pandemic revealed that many agencies had cramped quarters. "Now having an outside pavilion is like a house."

A new agency funded this year was the Economic Opportunities Council, which received a grant to build a playground at its Douglas Head Start Center in Wabasso. After the site team visited, members were so impressed, said Wheeler, that they wanted to give them the full amount requested.

Dogs for Life received a grant for the

first time in a long time, to cover a generator for the building.

"These service dogs help veterans and women first responders suffering from PTSD. This has turned into a real critical need," said Cramb. "They have weekly meetings for veterans with PTSD and weekly meetings for the female first responders. I had not appreciated all the different benefits these dogs can provide. So, we're learning a lot."

Youth Sailing Foundation received a first-time grant to fund catamarans for special needs sailors, ages 16 to 60, as well as beginner elementary sailors.

"This is certainly a very varied list; we're trying to work on all sorts of needs in Indian River County. We are trying harder to make sure that people are aware of the Johns Island Foundation," said Cramb. "We are a more quiet group, but that's part of who we are. And people are very generous."

The John's Island Foundation, which has provided more than \$14 million in grants pertaining to capital projects and improvements since 1999, solicits donations from residents through a seasonal campaign letter. Wheeler credits Emily Sherwood for establishing a Foundation Leadership Circle, whose members donate \$5,000 or more, and who now account for well over half the money they raise. ■

COVID-19 infections rising sharply again here, but hospitalizations remain relatively low

BY LISA ZAHNER
Staff Writer

New COVID-19 infections here reported to the Florida Department of Health more than doubled over the past week, going from 90 cases to 186 cases, and the countywide case positivity rate rose 61 percent in a single week, with 7.9 percent of people being tested now being found positive.

In the past four weeks, the average number of new daily infections reported here has more than tripled from 8.5 to 26.5 cases, thanks to the spread of the BA.2 or "stealth Omicron" variant that's taken hold in the Northeastern United States and is spreading to Florida.

Statewide, Florida is still in the green zone for low community transmission, according to the CDC's criteria, but cases rose 32 percent in a single week, from 15,623 to 20,680 as of Friday's report. In mid-March, the whole state reported between 8,000 and 9,000 new cases per week.

Increasingly popular in-home rapid

tests are the big unknown factor in the official case numbers, as people who test positive on DIY test kits typically do not report these results to the Florida Department of Health. These cases go unrecorded unless the individuals seek medical attention, or must report their illness due to their job or school attendance.

In-home tests kits can be obtained free of charge through a U.S. Postal Service website, plus most private insurance carriers cover or reimburse members for the purchase of these kits.

The CDC reports four hospitalizations of COVID-positive patients here over the past week, and eight COVID-positive people were hospitalized at Cleveland Clinic Indian River Hospital as of Monday, up from seven.

The School District of Indian River County reported 13 new COVID-19 infections last week, all of among public school students. Private and charter school case data is no longer available to the general public.

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