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The bottom line: Improvements at Tax Collector's Office saving money for residents

By Don Coble
don@claytodayonline.com

GREEN COVE SPRINGS – The first thing you notice in Diane Hutchings' office is her desk, bookcase and conference table. All are regal in both size and influence, each masterfully crafted from wood to command a higher sense of attention.

But they were done on the cheap. The one thing Hutchings hates most is spending money – especially other people's money.

The conference table was found in a closet at the Tax Collector's Office. Instead of buying a new one, she had it refinished. The desk and bookcase were purchased on Craig's List for pennies on the dollar.

"We're always working on ways to save time and money," Hutchings said. "That way, we can be more efficient, especially as our county grows."

SEE SAVINGS, 6



STAFF PHOTO BY JACK RANDALL

Tax Collector Diane Hutchings shows how the Luxer Locker works in the main lobby of the Green Cove Springs office. Car dealers can leave a stack of registration applications in a locker, and when they're completed, they will be notified by cellphone to return to pick them up from the locker. This eliminates the need for the dealership employee to wait for them to be done.

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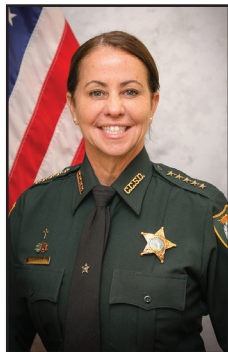
Sheriff's Office working on transition to police county schools

By Jack Randall
 jack@claytodayonline.com

FLEMING ISLAND – An unfortunate tragedy six years ago in Parkland sent shockwaves across the state of Florida and across the nation. Just one year after the mass shooting, the Clay County School Board voted to create and staff its police department.

It would serve Clay County District Schools for five years.

A 4-1 vote during a school board meeting last November, with Board Member Mary Bolla dissenting, would begin the process that would effectively disband the Clay County District Schools Police Department and fold personnel and resources under the direction of the Clay County Sheriff's Office.



Michelle Cook

Thereby ending CCSO's five-year absence. "The transition has been completed, and it won't be effective until July 1. So, we are currently processing the officers from the school board police who are interested in transitioning over," said Sheriff Michelle Cook.

The initial transition cost was projected at \$1.7 million, and it ended up being a bit less. The transition budget of \$1.3 million was approved by the school board and agreed upon by the Board of County Commissioners on Feb. 27.

A "cosmetic" change is the first thing that comes to mind. The transitional budget will pay for new uniforms, jackets, shirts, deputy patches, new firearms and new training for existing CCDS officers who will be under new management for the next school year.

The transition budget also includes background and psychological tests, which will largely be completed when students are away on Spring Break.

"We are working with the officers and school administrators to ensure continuity



The first group of Clay County District Schools Police Officers were sworn into office before starting on July 1, 2019.

in their on-duty, on-campus duties as a law enforcement officer," said Cook.

Cook said her transition team has yet to meet with school board members to create a working template. Until both parties talk, she doesn't know how, or if, CCSO's duties will differentiate from CCSDPD's.

As Wagner can certainly attest, the burden of being the chief of police for 44 schools in the district is not a light one.

While there is no point in reinventing the wheel, Wagner says there are new

state statutes that CCSO must be aware of since its hiatus five years ago.

CCSO said Chief Patrick Golemme will meet with Clay Today on March 20 to map out the changes and continuities as CCSO prepares for the school year.

"He (Golemme) is extremely busy preparing for the transition. Could you imagine having the responsibility of all the schools in one county to oversee law enforcement staffing?" Abbegail Harris, the public information deputy, said.

State of Clay: Elected officials said preparation for future growth starts now

By Don Coble
 don@claytodayonline.com

ORANGE PARK – County Mayors and the County Commission Chairman shared a common theme Wednesday at the annual

Clay Chamber State of the County Luncheon: the time to prepare for the future is right now.

BCC Chairman Jim Renninger joined

SEE STATE, XX



STAFF PHOTOS BY DON COBLE

County and municipal officials shared a common theme of working ahead of unprecedented growth expected in the next 15 years.

Tying the mock knot

FIHS CTE students stage wedding to gain real-life hospitality skills

By Don Coble
don@claytodayonline.com
GREEN COVE SPRINGS – Alyssa McAlpin and Ihsan Nairne started planning their wedding in August. They meticulously worked through the details and quickly learned that there seemed to be more questions and doubts than answers.

"I will definitely say I learned that we

need to plan everything out," the groom said. "As much as you might feel like you can do this later, you need to do it. Now. You need to do it before everything needs to get done, so when it comes down to that crunch time, you're ready."

When Nairne graduates, he knows the level of planning and hard work that awaits if he continues his interest in hospitality and tourism.

"I would say one of the things I've learned, I could probably speak for us both, is preparation," he said. "I feel like that's everything. I mean, as much as we thought we were prepared, I guess it finally came down to the last week when we were good to go."



STAFF PHOTOS BY DON COBLE

Instead of completing their vows with a kiss, Fleming Island High seniors Alyssa McAlpin and Ihsan Nairne form a heart with their hands. The school held a mock wedding Thursday in Green Cove Springs as part of its Career and Technical Education training for its Hospitality, Photography, TV Production, Sign Language and Chorus classes.

SEE KNOT, 9



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OPINIONS & VIEWPOINTS

If it's good music, it's good music

My neighbor was washing and waxing his car last weekend when I walked over to his driveway. He had music playing a bit loudly, and he assumed I was coming over to complain. He was surprised when I offered my electric car buffer, if he needed it.

That's how neighbors are supposed to roll.

He was playing Earth, Wind & Fire, which I would never complain about. In fact, if he had asked me if he should turn it down, I would have suggested turning it up.

That's how neighbors are



Don Coble

supposed to roll. Our conversation stayed on music. He asked me about my favorite songs. I don't think he was prepared for my answer. I don't know if anyone would have been.

I answered immediately, which really threw him off guard.

"Fire and Rain" by James Taylor. It has been my favorite song even before I knew the first verse was about a friend committing suicide, the second was about Taylor's heroin addiction and the third verse was about a mental hospital. I didn't know it for 30 years, but I still like the song.

My other favorite songs are "The Last Rebel" by Lynyrd Skynyrd, "Blue Jeans Blues" by ZZ Top, "Purple Rain" by Prince, "The Rain Song" by Led Zeppelin, "Stormy Monday" by the Allman Brothers Band, "Racing in the Street" by Bruce Spring-

steen" and "On the Coast of Somewhere Beautiful" by Kenny Chesney.

I just realized I apparently like a lot of songs about rain and storms.

Black, white, men, women, Americans, foreigners, short, tall, skinny, not-so-skinny— it doesn't matter. If it's good music, it's good music. That's how we should make all of our choices.

No matter how hard Corporate America and Mainstream Media attempt to inflict its indoctrination, the product should be judged by the final product. There's no room for categories. The music industry has been divided, then sub-divided and cataloged into so many subsets that it's challenging to determine if a band comes from rock, country, pop or rap. My question is, why do they have to represent any group? Just play the

SEE MUSIC, 5

Is the clock ticking for TikTok?

By Jack Randall
jack@claytodayonline.com

In a 352-65 vote, the U.S. House of Representatives issued an ultimatum to ByteDance, which owns the internationally popular app TikTok.

Essentially, you can sell your app to a U.S. company, or it will be banned in the U.S.

President Joe Biden said he would sign it into law, although the bill appears to have uncertain traction in the Senate.

If the bill is signed into law, it is quite probable that TikTok will cease to exist in our country – its tombstone next to Flappy Bird and Vine. A ban is more likely than you think, considering Americans only make up 10% of the over one billion views that TikTok reels monthly. Analysts doubt ByteDance would be willing to part with its most profitable platform.

All of this is because of a perceived national security risk that has yet to be proven. U.S. officials still have not publicly presented evidence that the Chinese government has accessed the user data of U.S. TikTok users.

Instead, they have thrown out empty accusations. One congressman was seemingly unaware of the difference between Singapore and China. It was an embarrassing spectacle, and it will be even more so if



Jack Randall

This Month in History

Five years ago, 2019

- In an effort to raise awareness for the Wounded Warrior Project, Ken Brock and his service dog Pam reached the halfway mark from Keystone Heights to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. The journey was made all on foot, through thunderstorms and tornadoes.

- After being opened in Fleming Island for four years, Mackey's Munchies moved to its new location at 868 Blanding Blvd.

- The Orange Park Town Council voted to create the Historic Preservation Board.

SEE HISTORY, 5



SEE TIKTOK, 6

Send us a letter ...

We'd like to hear from you. Perhaps you are concerned about the county commission, the school board or your city council or commission, sit down and take a few moments to write us a letter. All we ask is that you keep it civil, no name-calling and write no more than 600 words. All we ask is that you stick

to local issues, be clear and make a point. We reserve the right to edit for AP Stylebook errors, grammar and spelling. In your email, type Letter to the Editor in your subject and send it to Managing Editor Don Coble at don@opcfla.com. We look forward to hearing from you!

Opinions ...

The views and opinions expressed on this page are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Clay Today.

History

from page 4

10 years ago, 2014

• The Clay County Sheriff's Office, Orange Park Police Department, state office of Parole and Probation, the NCIS and State Attorney's Office joined forces in a countywide drug sweep that culminated with 35 arrests.

• A fisherman from Richmond, Virginia, caught and released 12 Florida large-mouth bass, one of which was a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Trophy Catch Hall of Fame entry verified as 13 pounds, 12 ounces.

• Former Fleming Island resident Alexandre Mohbat made the Lebanese Winter Olympic Games team in the giant slalom.

20 years ago, 2004

• The Clay County School Board held its first meeting at the new Teacher Training Center on the campus of Fleming Island High School leaving behind its decades old meeting room at the school district

headquarters in Green Cove Springs.

• Clay County Sheriff's Office deputies joined other law enforcement agencies to conduct a six-month investigation aiming to arrest 46 suspects for various charges ranging from dealing in stolen property to drug charges as part of "Operation Spring Cleaning." Officers set up shop in a fake pawn shop in Middleburg to carry out the operation.

30 years ago, 1994

• Clay County Clerk of Court John Keene said a third-party audit of clerk office finances exonerated him and the county of any alleged wrongdoing. He had been accused of "irregularities" in managing county funds.

• Bishop John J. Snyder dined with students at Annunciation Catholic School to celebrate National Nutrition Month.

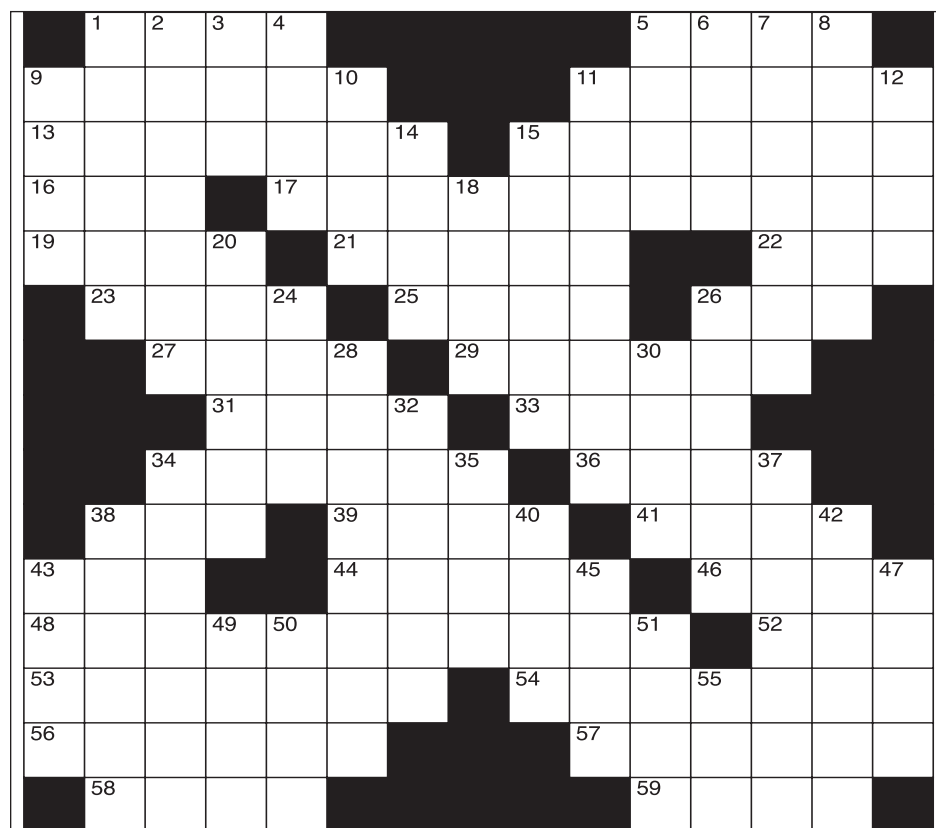
40 years ago, 1984

• The Clay County School Board moved ahead with plans to buy a 37-acre site near Ridgeview Elementary, where it planned to build a middle school. The land was purchased for \$457,000.

• The Clay County Sheriff's Office conducted a foot and air search for a missing 13-year-old boy from Keystone Heights. The family became alarmed when the family dog showed back up at home, but the child did not.

50 years ago, 1974

• The Green Cove Springs City Council de-authorized its city landfill and began transporting refuse to a county landfill in Doctors Inlet.



- CLUES ACROSS
- 1. Chaps
 - 5. Currently fashionable
 - 9. Collision
 - 11. More slim
 - 13. European city
 - 15. Implicitly
 - 16. The side of something that is sheltered from the wind
 - 17. The Mount Rushmore State
 - 19. Gold or silver wire cord
 - 21. Muscles along insects diaphragm
 - 22. Trent Reznor's band
 - 23. Sweet juicy gritty-textured fruit
 - 25. Broken branch
 - 26. Indicates ten
 - 27. Expression of annoyance
 - 29. Brings together
 - 31. Ancient city in Thrace
 - 33. Sailors' spirit
 - 34. Looked into
 - 36. Muckraking woman journalist Rheta
 - 38. A type of cast
 - 39. One's responsibility
 - 41. Where golfers begin
 - 43. Make a mistake
 - 44. Semitic Sun god
 - 46. Ancient Italian-Greek colony
 - 48. Beheaded
 - 52. A place to stay
 - 53. Unwise
 - 54. Most supernatural
 - 56. Dennis is a famous one
 - 57. Ointments
 - 58. Exam
 - 59. Leaked blood
 - 15. Assembly
 - 18. Russian pop duo
 - 20. Embellished with expressions
 - 24. Infrequent
 - 26. Temperature unit
 - 28. Hydrophilic amino acid
 - 30. Honk
 - 32. Legislative body
 - 34. Swinish
 - 35. Russian assembly
 - 37. Take over for
 - 38. Put in advance
 - 40. Satisfy
 - 42. Felt
 - 43. Dutch cheese
 - 45. Witnesses
 - 47. Strong insects
 - 49. Gasteyer and de Armas are two
 - 50. Ancient people of Scotland
 - 51. Cheerless
 - 55. Sick
- CLUES DOWN
- 1. Baseball managers assemble it
 - 2. Revised
 - 3. Mountain is a popular kind
 - 4. Takes to civil court
 - 5. Pouches
 - 6. A type of veil
 - 7. Chants
 - 8. Boston hoopster
 - 9. Elongated appendage
 - 10. Sailboat
 - 11. 2017 Oscar-winning film
 - 12. Actor Gosling
 - 14. Monetary units

Music

from page 4

music and let the fans decide with their credit cards.

Racing is doing the same thing. NASCAR has a diversity program. Why? Isn't racing about showing up with the fastest car and crossing the finish line first? Isn't first place more important than your nationality or the color of your skin?

If you want a real lesson in diversity, go to an NHRA drag race. It's no big deal because the garage is filled with Black, Hispanic and women racers. When they win, they don't throw a parade or march them onto the "Good Morning America" set. One reason is they win a lot. The NHRA doesn't talk about diversity. They live it. Good for them.

Until we stop making diversity a big deal, it won't stop being a big deal. I mean that in a constructive way. There will be a divide as long as we keep talking about



being in a divide.

Chapel Hart is coming to the Clay County Agricultural Fair on Friday, April 5. They are immensely talented and have a broad spectrum of musical abilities.

The two sisters and first cousin in the group are Black.

I hesitate to say that because it shouldn't be important. Good music is good music, regardless of how it's made. Having said that, I invite you to attend the concert and prove me right. I hope to see you there.

And I will invite my neighbor because that's how neighbors are supposed to roll.

Savings

from page 1

Hutchings was elected in 2020 and immediately moved to automate the office. Clerks got second computer screens, so they didn't have to constantly close one program to move to another. The office added a no-fee service to accept checks online and a tag renewal kiosk at the Publix Super Market at the Village Shopping Center in Orange Park.

"By adding the second screen, we sometimes reduced the amount of time they were on the phone by an hour, and we kept them from making repetitive keystrokes," she said. "Before, it was just one monitor. They had to close the window, open a window, close a window, close a window. Now they just go."

The main office at the County Administration Building offers a unique service for residents who have difficulty speaking English.

"We have a device called Pocketalk that we can use to set up a language and ask someone what they need, and it will ask them in their language," Hutchings said. "When they respond, the answer is given back in English. It's important for someone to feel comfortable. There's no confusion. It saves time and eliminates mistakes."

Hutchings likened the software to "Blockbuster Video" when she took over. The new software was expensive up front, but she said the time saved on the back-



A Tax Collector staff member shows how a machine can open, sort and catalog envelopes with checks to be deposited. The process saves hours of valuable time - and money.

side far offset the investment. She found that other Florida tax offices had saved "millions" over time with the new software, so she bought it.

"It was a no-brainer," she said, "especially when you eliminate keystrokes and save hours of time."

The Green Cove Springs office also uses a machine that opens, separates and catalogs checks for deposits. What used to take a half day now takes less than an hour.

After all, time is money.

The offices in Orange Park and Keystone Heights are in transition, too. Hutchings said the Park Central Plaza office will soon be relocated to the Challenge Enterprises Plaza at 500 Kingsley Ave.

"When ACE Hardware opened on Park Avenue, parking can be a little difficult at times," Hutchings said. "There's plenty of parking at Challenge, and it's helping a great organization."

Rent is also cheaper there.

The Keystone Heights office will soon move from Keystone Village Square on State Road 100 to the Clay County Health Department on Commercial Drive, where the rent is free since the county owns the building.

The Middleburg location has already been moved from Bear Run to the Grande Olde Plaza near the intersection of State Road 21 and County Road 218 to accom-

modate additional services and residents.

Last year, more than 100,000 residents visited one of the four offices for a transaction, including property taxes, driver's, hunting and fishing licenses, motor vehicle registrations, birth certificates and concealed weapon permits. The offices accepted appointments, but walk-ins generally are in and out in less than 30 minutes.

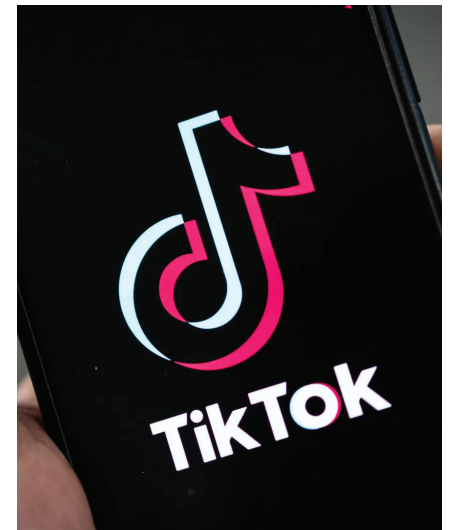
Most of her staff are allowed to wear blue jeans on Friday because they participate in a CARES committee. They voluntarily donate \$4 a month to a fund that's used to pay for flowers when someone is sick or dies, or it's used to pay for parties.

"We can't use public money, so we build a little fund for things we need," Hutchings said. "It creates an upbeat attitude. You'd be surprised what a big deal it is to be able to wear blue jeans."

Employees also select a nonprofit to highlight in the lobbies of their offices. Since June 2021, they've turned over more than \$31,000 to groups like the Quigley House, American Cancer Society's Breast Cancer Research, Operation Barnabas, The Vineyard Transitional Center, Safe Animal Shelter, Wolfson's Children's Hospital and the Clay County Education Foundation.

"There's a lot going on here," Hutchings said.

All with a keen eye on the bottom line.



TikTok

from page 4

this bill becomes signed into law.

Our nation is so quick to deplore China for censoring free speech, and this bill comes right out of the CCP's playbook. TikTok isn't allowed in China, either. Their app is called "Douyin."

Despite what Congress says, the bill is effectively a ban. (Gee, where have we heard this before?) Worse, it's a rug pull. It's a move to pseudo-nationalize TikTok by folding it underneath a domestic company.

Besides, what is the assurance that an American company will even play by the rules anyway? Let's not forget about the \$725 million class action lawsuit against Meta, the parent company for Facebook, in which the company admitted to giving third parties access to user data without their consent. That user data was used to inform political campaigns.

TikTok is an app that is contributed overwhelmingly by individual creators and small businesses, who are often paid for their posts after reaching a certain number of followers. I have a TikTok. My family and friends have one. Even Clay Today has an official TikTok, which I help manage.

And it all could be taken away because our domestic media companies weren't getting a piece of the pie.

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Grand opening for Clay County Regional Sports Complex on April 5

For *The Oakleaf*

CLAY COUNTY—The county is inviting the community to the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new Clay County Regional Sports Complex on Friday, April 5, at 2 p.m.

The park is located on State Road 21, one mile north of the SR 16 intersection. It will provide a venue for competitive sports and public recreation.

This 250-acre property is the first facility in Clay County, making it an incredible asset to the community and a high-demand

sports destination in Northeast Florida.

Phase 1 of the Clay County Regional Sports Complex includes eight multipurpose fields, lighting, shade structures, ample parking, and restroom facilities.

Currently, the park is open for scheduled tournaments only, with plans to allow recreational practices in the future. To learn more, visit claycountygov.com/Home/Components/News/News/3763/1512.

The county is inviting the community to the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new Clay County Regional Sports Complex on Friday, April 5, at 2 p.m.

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State from page 2

Mayors Connie Butler of Green Cove Springs, Randy Anderson of Orange Park, Adrian Andrews of Penney Farms and Nina Rodenroth of Keystone Heights to share their municipality's vision to prepare for unprecedented growth already on planning boards. They shared their visions with a room filled with elected, business and community leaders at the Thrasher-Horne Center. Officials said as many as 10,800 new homes are planned for five different developments, and with that comes the immediate need to repair and build infrastructure to meet the demands.

"My fellow Commissioners and I passed the budget surpassing \$731 million for this fiscal year, a huge amount of money," Renninger said. "A majority of those dollars are earmarked for increasing infrastructure, public safety and services to our community."

Renninger said in the next 15 years,

4,000 homes are planned for the Governors Park community; another 4,300 are expected at Saratoga Springs; the Rookery will have 2,000 homes and as many as 500 are slated at Sunrise Road and Fox Run Road developments in Keystone Heights.

The county will spend \$174 million on road projects to keep pace. It will also build four new fire stations and remodel many of the 12 existing stations.

Renninger said other Northeast Florida Regional Council counties are working with Clay to create a regional plan. According to the U.S. Census, more than 300,000 people moved to Clay, Duval, Nassau, St. Johns, Baker, Putnam and Flagler counties last year. "The Regional Council helped us to develop our first five-year strategic plan," he said. "They helped us develop such things as substance use disorder, transportation and resiliency."

All while maintaining a "small county" feel.

"I just want to say we are all about small towns and big passions," he said.

Andrews said Penney Farms is re-

placing its water pipes and electronically mapping out the town to be better prepared when the property around the 1.46-square-mile sleepy community is sold for development.

"We're trying to catch up with the technology that's out there to keep us abreast of what's going on in our town," he said. "Gold used to be the No. 1 investment. No longer. So we know we are surrounded by land that belongs to a corporation. When that group sells out, we're going to be able to handle the growth, those homes, and whatever business is coming our way."

Butler said Green Cove Springs is bracing for developments that will come when the First Coast Expressway is completed near the city's south side.

The city council has developed comprehensive plans to maintain its historic nature while welcoming new growth.

"As we know, our county is growing, and it's growing by leaps and bounds," she said. And in the process, we don't want to forget about the residents. You hear a lot about the growth, the growth, the growth. So, we're looking at ways to embrace the growth and have that balance."

Butler gleefully reminded everyone Green Cove Springs will celebrate its 150th birthday as a municipality this year. While the official event will be on Nov. 2, other events will be celebrated as lead-ups to the big party.

Orange Park's Anderson boasted that

his town operates on a \$24 million budget and has no debt. He said the town is working to replace the last 45 septic tanks inside the city limits. Orange Park has also invested significantly in buying wetlands and improving drainage to address frequent flooding. Finally, Rodenroth reminded everyone of Keystone Heights' historic and recreational past. The city has rebuilt and opened the Keystone Beach Pavillion, and the water levels in the lakes will soon rise again when the Black Creek Restoration Project is completed by next year.

"After 15 years of the lakes in recession, we experienced a dramatic change in our physical landscape, property values, businesses and tourism appeal," she said. "The Black Creek project promises the return of our lakes' waters back to their pristine beauty and abounding shorelines."

"Fifty-seven percent of our residents were born in Keystone Heights. I value their input and vision as it will shed light on just how truly amazing the return of those precious lakes will be. Partnering with our Clay County tourism marketing team will be critical for our short-term future plans for success. Keystone's growth and tourism potential will deliver much excitement and thrill as we create our own moments in time. It can be yours."

The event was hosted by the Clay Chamber, and Baptist Medical Center Clay was the presenting sponsor.

Knot from page 3

The event was magical and picturesque. The nuptials were on the shoreline of the St. Johns River last Thursday in a historic stretch of homes and towering oaks.

When told he could kiss the bride, Nairne and McAlpin formed a heart shape with their hands. After greeting guests and taking photos, the young couple went their separate ways.

Career and Technical Education programs at Fleming Island High staged the event. The Hospitality and Tourism class was joined by photography, television production, American sign language students and members of the school's chorus to create the perfect mock wedding.

Students spent six months gaining practical experience in their related fields.

"So for the hospitality students, this is their event," said CTE instructor Laura Kirk. "I am just here to answer their questions. This is a student-led project. This is their grade for the third quarter. They get to see the logistics that goes into something this big."

Students had to secure a venue, find a gown, formal wear, music, a "minister,"



photographers, snacks, and cake, and set up a "mocktails" station. There also was a rehearsal, setting up and taking down the event and planning transportation.

Nairne said this year's seniors added more elements to the annual CTE event, including the chorus.

"I think we pulled it off," he said. "We're pretty happy with the results."

Two students, Ray Araujo-Tee and Taylor Collins, were the wedding planners.



Fleming Island High Principal Thomas Pittman walks bride Alyssa McAlpin down the aisle.

Collins had a clipboard with instructions and a headset to ensure everything went smoothly and on time.

"There's a lot that goes into a wedding," Kirk said.

McAlpin said the most important thing she learned was planning. Those lessons will be invaluable when she attends the University of North Florida next year as she adjusts to a college schedule.

"The main thing is to stay within a

plan," she said. "This is our senior year. You prepare yourself for a wedding, but then you also need to look at these things, prepare yourself for college, and take what you learn in a different aspect."

Principal Thomas Pittman walked McAlpin down the aisle. He said the mock wedding has become one of his favorite school year projects because students use real-life skills without a real-life marital commitment.



After the wedding, guests, including school board member Mary Bolla, were invited to enjoy "Mocktails" and snacks.

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The Precedent-setting Black River Phosphate Company

By Vishi Garig

Historical Archives Supervisor, A service of Clerk of Courts and Comptroller Tara S. Green

CLAY COUNTY – The Industrial Revolution led to many changes in agriculture. With machines now doing the bulk of the hard work, farmers produced crops on a grander scale. As fertile farmland became scarce after the Civil War, farmers needed a way to increase the yield per acre. Fertilizer was one of the ways to do that, and it resulted in a high demand for both fertilizers and pesticides. One of those fertilizers was phosphate. The 1890s brought the discovery of large phosphate deposits in Florida and industrial-scale mining operations.

Clay County had a phosphate source, which was under the dark, tannic waters of Black Creek. Accumulated eons ago, Florida's phosphate deposits are believed to have originated in a few different ways. In a process called precipitation, some of the phosphate formed when conditions in the seawater caused dissolved phosphorus to solidify. As the solids settled to the bottom of the shallow coastal waters, they became part of the sedimentary layers that eventually formed the sediment that is mined today. Sea life excrement and remains also played a large part in creating the deposits. Bones, teeth, and

other fossilized animal remains all contributed to the formation. Phosphate was also reported at other locations in Alachua and Duval counties. The largest deposits were discovered in Polk, Hillsborough, Manatee and DeSoto counties.

The phosphate at Black Creek was found to be part of the Hawthorne formation and more of a phosphate marl, which is pebbles mixed with lots of silica and clay. The quality of the phosphate was too low for export to Europe, so the mineral was distributed in America.

Investors at that time were interested in ventures that extracted resources from Florida's water and land. One such prospect was the Black River Phosphate Company based in Jacksonville. Capitalized at \$200,000, it was the only phosphate mining company in Clay County. Between 1891 and 1895, Black River mined approximately 45 tons a day of pebble phosphate from Black Creek.

Black River Phosphate Company used barges, hydraulics, and dredges to mine the creek. Owning the acreage on both sides of the waterway, they built wharves on each bank to support their operation while pumps and barges operated in the middle. The first pumps used to mine the pebbles were installed in dredge boats in the early 1890s. Black River Phosphate

Company got theirs in 1892. The 8-inch pump, which ran on steam engines, produced an average daily yield of 35-45 tons of pebble each day.

Dredging went on for 12 hours a day and was hazardous to workers. The inferno-like summer climate of Florida intensified the already tough working conditions. One can imagine the steam and boilers amping up the already stifling heat. Drowning, gators, and snakes were severe issues for workers, too, as were mosquito-borne diseases. Another hazard was continued exposure to low radioactivity levels, which were emitted as trace elements of uranium from the phosphate marl. Uranium is highly carcinogenic, and inhalation of phosphate dust poses additional dangers to the laborers.

Everything was going smoothly until the State of Florida sued Black River Phosphate (BRP). The 1893 Florida Supreme Court opinion set a nationwide precedent in the area of riparian owners' rights. (Riparian refers to any property relating to or situated on the banks of a river.) The precedent set in *State v. Black River Phosphate*, 13 So. 640 (Fla. 1893) is still being cited and followed. The Court's task was to determine the nature of the ownership of the state of Florida, which had to land under navigable waterways. BRP was

taking phosphate from the bed of Black Creek, which was both tidal and navigable. BRP's claim to the land was based on The Riparian Act of 1856, which granted "title" to riparian owners, giving them the right to build wharves into the state's waters. BRP argued that this "right" applied to the minerals under their land and into the creek bed.

The Court thought otherwise.

The Court stated the Riparian Act must be strictly construed in favor of the state or public, and they held that nothing passed to the riparian owners that weren't denoted in clear and special words. The purpose of the act was found in the phrase "full right and privilege to build wharves" and no other rights. In other words, BRP could build wharves and docks 'til the cows came home, but until the state gave them a permit to mine and they paid the \$1 per ton fee the state demanded, there would be no further mining of the underwater land.

The Court concluded that the navigable waters of the state and the land beneath them are the property of the state and held for the use and enjoyment of all the people of the state. Clay County contributed one of the greatest riparian rights cases to American jurisprudence.

SEE CLAY, 14

OAKLEAF

SPORTS

Oakleaf Softball Tournament of Champions

RHS, OHS battle out the final game

By Randy Lefko
Randy@claytodayonline.com

OAKLEAF - With three days of hard-grinding softball on display at the Oakleaf Tournament of Champions highlighting north Florida prowess in the sport, it was almost fitting that the final game of the three-day round-robin tournament featured a knuckle-biter between the two local teams.

"You know I don't like our situation right now," said Ridgeview High coach Angela Agurkis, after a first game 8-0 loss to University Christian after successive losses of 7-3 to Bartram Trail and 10-0 to Oakleaf before the tournament. "Sometimes a team takes a slow start to figure out their greatness. I think this Spring Break tournament was a huge turnaround for the Panthers."

For Oakleaf coach Heather Han, who entered the tournament with three wins of 4-1 over Winter Springs, 5-2 over Fleming

Island and the aforementioned 10-0 over Ridgeview, the batting lineup is still a shuffle, but the fielding is what is her biggest concern

"Game one, a 7-2 loss to Fort White, was a tough loss," said Han, after the 7-2 loss to Fort White. "We had opportunities to put away a good team and didn't take them. There were two balls that we had chances on that dropped in which led to Fort White scoring late."

For Ridgeview, the slate from the 10-0 romp by Oakleaf in the regular season final; six runs in the first three innings thanks to an error and a wild pitch and hard-hitting from Oakleaf's Charlotte Maddox and Camryn Beall, before the Spring Break, an opening loss of 8-0 to University Christian, with University's power pitcher Sophia Kardatzke's 11 Ks for the day, started badly with a second-inning homer off Ridgeview starter Saige Bialek.



Left: Oakleaf pitcher Charlotte Maddox had strong three day tournament while Ridgeview's Hannah Crosby nearly pulled out upset over Oakleaf in final game.



Oakleaf High softball baserunner Jaydyn Beall slides under catcher for Fort White to score in early innings in Knights 7-2 loss in Oakleaf High Tournament of Champions last week.

Agurkis gave her best Sunday-go-meeting post-game huddle and the Panthers came back with a 2-0 loss to Fort White with Fort White scoring two in the second and holding court in a pitching duel between Ridgeview senior Hannah Crosby who got just two strikeouts, but weathered numerous innings with outstanding field play behind her.

"Every day we are becoming stronger and smarter athletes and something finally clicked," said Agurkis. "As a coach, I am excited to see what prevails out of this squad. Don't count us out yet."

Crosby opened her at-bats with a monster triple in the first, but Megan Jeffers struck out to leave her there in Ridgeview's first salvo in the batter's box.

Jeffers stepped up in the field in the follow-up at-bat with a nifty ground-out

snag from her third base position with Crosby whiffing one.

Jeffers kept busy in the third inning with a heads-up toss to home plate stymying a run attempt after bobbling a hard grounder to put runners in play for Fort White. Fort White would score their two runs off a long single to center field before Crosby and A Stephens combined for an inning-ending double play on a fly ball and a not-tag by the Fort White baserunner at second base.

Oakleaf, in their first game, a 7-2 loss to Fort White, held a 1-0 first-inning lead to the sixth inning with Jaydyn Beall on base via a bunt, then scoring off a sacrifice fly by Maddox. The slim lead held until a hurricane hit and Fort White took advan-

Bob Hayes High School Track Invite

Keester wins fourth 3200

By Randy Lefko
 Sports Editor

JACKSONVILLE - Fleming Island High senior track runner John Keester IV kept his cool and achieved an unprecedented fourth straight track title at the prestigious Bob Hayes Invitational as Keester won his fourth 3200-meter race Saturday at the University of North Florida.

Along with Keester, teammate Roman Mollicone won the 800 and, for Oakleaf, triple jumper Takoda Brown, won his event by nearly two feet. Fleming Island triple jumper Mikayla Shavers won her event by three inches to keep her number one ranking state-wide.

Keester, who toys both the mile and 3200, has dominated the front of the 3200 since his freshman season with wins at Raines High School before the Bob Hayes was moved to UNF.

Keester's winning time was 9:42.36, just off his season best of 9:42.36 but well away from his personal best of 9:25.55, set at last year's Bob Hayes event at UNF.

Keester won over Bishop Kenny's Alejandro Vinas who split at 9:55.03 with Creekside's John Zurn third at 9:57.95. Fleming Island's Jacob Campbell finished ninth at 10:18.60.

In the 800 meters, Fleming Island senior Roman Mollicone complemented his very fast second-place finish last weekend at Flagler Palm in 1:55.92 with an even faster winning time at Bob Hayes with a 1:54.74 winning clock. Mollicone was ahead of Miami Northwestern's Devin Jones' in 1:55.38 and Episcopal's Jake Officer in 1:55.94. Luke Melson was in the 800 field with a 2:02.11 split for 14th with Orange Park's Jacob Gaskin finishing 32nd in 2:07.35. In the open 1600, Fleming Island got another distance win with Andrew Boyer winning in 4:31.00 with Oakleaf's JP Strombeck eighth in 4:45.41.



Oakleaf triple jumper Takoda Brown received a Bob Hayes trophies Saturday afternoon at University of North Florida.



Oakleaf offensive lineman Quory Ambrose will next play at Presbyterian College after a great career at Oakleaf.

For the Fleming Island girls, miler Brooke Reynolds went solo without teammate Allie Knotts, out with illness, and finished 16th in the 800 in 2:25.77 and eighth in the elite 1600 with a 5:19.60, a season-best. Oakleaf's Morgan Wade was 12th in the 1600 in 5:33.58.

In the triple jump, Oakleaf's Takoda Brown leaped 47'-3.75" to win over Bartram Trail's Anim Gyamfi whose best was just 45'-6.25". Orange Park's Nethen Verger was 11th in 41'-7.25". Verger was third in long jump at 22'-3.5" with Isaiah Johnson of Choctawhatchee winning at 32'-1.75" and also Verger was fourth in the 110 hurdles

in 15.12.

For the girls' triple jump, Fleming Island's Mikayla Shavers won by three inches at 38'-5" over Sanau Jhagroo of Rockledge and well ahead of chief state rival Shakynah Tresvant of Miami Northwestern who was fourth at 37'-10".

In 100 hurdles, Oakleaf's Keira Smalls was eighth in 14.74 behind a winning time of 13.12 by Aleesa Samuel of Somerset Academy.

In the javelin, Oakleaf's Madison Linscomb was sixth at 103'-09". In the triple jump, Fleming Island

Softball

from page 11

tage of errors to score three, then four in the seventh; the three via a center field fly error after three singles, the four via a triple after two singles in the seventh.

Against University Christian, a 5-3 rebound win, Oakleaf got behind 2-0 in the first, but methodically, with four uncharacteristic straight walks by Kardatzke, got one run back.

Tournament of Champions roster

Fort White, Class 1A, 7-2, 2023
Region quarters
University Christian, Class 2A, 7-2, 2023
2A champions
Ridgeview, Class 5A, 2-5, 2023
Region final
Oakleaf, Class 6A, 6-4, 2023
Region quarters

Maddox got stung with a homer in the second by Kardatzke to retake the lead before doubles by Meshayla Pettaway and Mirelez put points on the board for Oakleaf.

Maddox and Mirelez, at first base, executed a double play in the next inning to put Oakleaf back at bat.

A second double from Mirelez scored Maddox for the final run in the fifth.

With both teams; Ridgeview and



Former Ridgeview standout softball player Sarah Anderson, in blue pants, gives hopeful safe sign in close play at first base for batter Ky Torrence in game against University Christian.

Oakleaf, battered and bruised from their previous two games in the tournament, Saturday's final game would be a fitting regroup for both teams as the second half of the regular season resumes this week as Mirelez scored 21 outs from the mound with six strikeouts and eight hits by Ridgeview getting stuff on the field to hold the shutout.

"University Christian is always a tough team and playing any Clay County team twice within a 10-day stretch is going to be tough," said Han. "Our upperclassmen are pushing the younger kids to be better."

Crosby doubled in the first; no runs scored. Ridgeview got two singles in the third; no runs scored.

Maddox loads the bases with a single in the third; no runs scored.

Torrence doubles and Kirk bunts to third; no runs scored in the fifth.

A Crosby walk to Jaydyn Beall turns into a run scored with a Maddox single.

In the sixth, Haylee McRae doubles for



Oakleaf's Meshayla Pettaway is one of many big bats for Knights.

Ridgeview; no runs scored.

In the seventh, Bialek was hit by pitch from Mirelez, Torrence singles, Camryn Beall to second baseman Zoe Schmehl for game-ending double play.



Oakleaf second baseman Zoe Schmehl nailed a nifty double play ball to stymie Ridgeview's upset attempt in final game. Right: Charlotte Maddox is second big bat for Knights while also whiffing batters from the hill.

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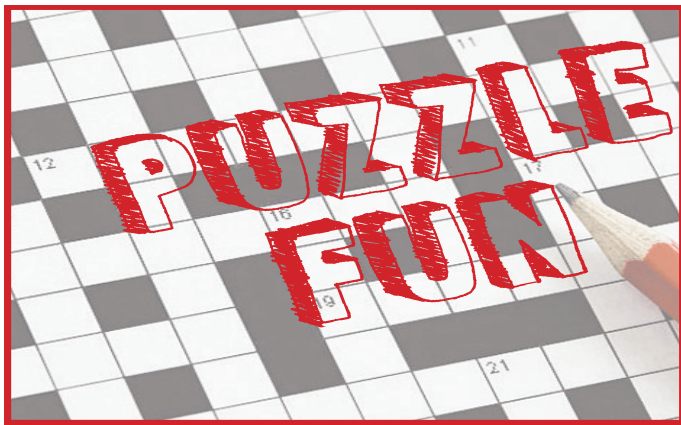
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			3					

Level: Advanced



Clay

from page 10

Today, 90% of phosphate production is used for fertilizer to produce food and fiber, and 5% is used for livestock feed supplements, and the other 5% is used for vitamins, soft drinks, toothpaste, film, light bulbs, bone china, flame-resistant fabrics and optical glass. Florida is the world leader in phosphate rock production, annually producing 75% of the U.S. and 25% of the world supply.

Interested in this topic or any other topic related to Clay County history? Visit the Clay County Archives located inside the Old Jail at 21 Gratio Place in Green Cove Springs. The archives is open 8 a.m.-5 p.m., Monday-Friday. Call ahead (904) 371-0027 or visit clayclerk.com.

Sources: Clay County Archives & Florida Industrial and Phosphate Research Institute, <https://fipr.floridapoly.edu/>.

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CRYPTO FUN

Determine the code to reveal the answer!

Solve the code to discover words related to basketball.
Each number corresponds to a letter.
(Hint: 20 = T)

- A. 11 7 19 19**
Clue: Toss ball
- B. 11 1 21 12 20 19**
Clue: Score
- C. 4 1 24 14 20**
Clue: Playing area
- D. 2 7 19 15 9 20**
Clue: Hoop

Answers: A. pass B. points C. court D. basket

WORD SCRAMBLE

Rearrange the letters to spell something pertaining to basketball.

BLRDEIB

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Answer: Dribble

Guess Who?

I am an actor born in Connecticut on March 8, 1977. I was in an all-male cappella group in high school, but wanted to try professional acting. I am best known for a breakout role on a popular television show about four teens in a coastal town in which I was the titular character.

Answer: James Van Der Beek

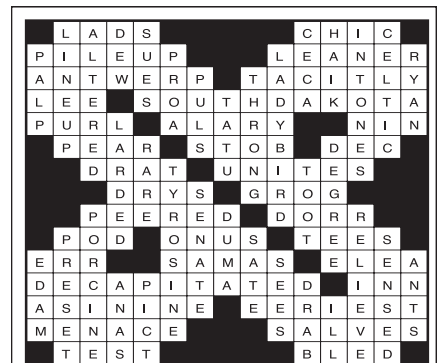
MARCH MADNESS WORD SEARCH

C I Y I R A M W L T B P H N G G E K D V
R D I G S R C N I P L L N V E R R D B M
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O K Y V T W F M Y A A S R V E I Y V W K
F P M O B V H C B P S M Y G K T M O C L

Find the words hidden vertically, horizontally, diagonally, and backwards.

WORDS

- BANK
- BASKETBALL
- CENTER
- COURT
- DEFENSE
- DRIBBLE
- FORWARD
- FOUL
- FREE THROW
- GUARD
- HOOPS
- LAYUP
- LINEUP
- NET
- OFFENSE
- OPEN
- OVERHEAD
- PALMING
- PASS
- REBOUND
- SHOOTER
- SIDELINES
- TRAVELING
- WALKING



9	8	7	2	4	5	1	3	6
3	1	4	8	6	7	5	9	2
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5	9	8	1	2	3	7	6	4
7	4	6	5	9	8	2	1	3
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4	5	3	7	8	9	6	2	1
8	2	9	3	1	6	4	7	5

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