

# ANNUAL REPORT

2025



## Highlands County

Board of County Commissioners





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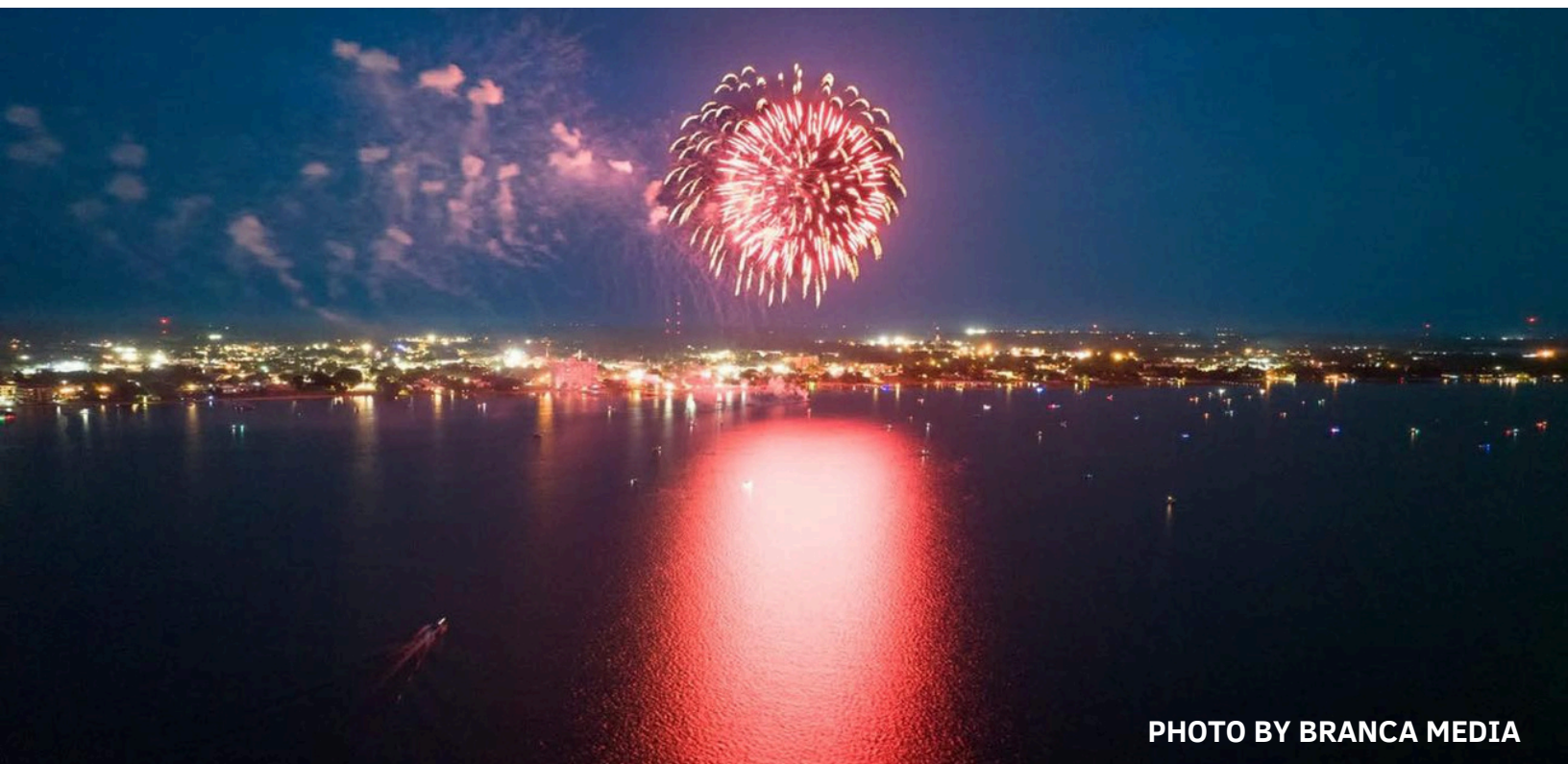


PHOTO BY BRANCA MEDIA

# HIGHLANDS COUNTY

# MEET THE COMMISSIONERS



**KEVIN ROBERTS**  
**DISTRICT 1**



**DON ELWELL**  
**DISTRICT 2**  
BOARD VICE CHAIR



**SCOTT KIROUAC**  
**DISTRICT 3**



**ARLENE TUCK**  
**DISTRICT 4**  
BOARD CHAIR



**CHRIS CAMPBELL**  
**DISTRICT 5**

Regular Board meetings are advertised, open to the public, and streamed live.

Accessed from:

- 600 S. Commerce Ave., Sebring
- [www.highlandsfl.gov](http://www.highlandsfl.gov)

Highlands County is governed by five elected commissioners, each representing one of five geographic county districts.

All commissioners are elected at large.

## HIGHLANDS COUNTY

# MESSAGE FROM THE ADMINISTRATOR

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**Dear Commissioners,**

**I'm proud to share Highlands County's 2025 Annual Report – a look back at the progress we've made together and the continued efforts to keep our community safe, vibrant, and thriving.**

**This past year has been one of teamwork, innovation, and steady growth. Our dedicated county staff, along with local organizations and residents, have worked side by side on projects that make a real difference in people's lives.**

From new roads to long-awaited facilities for Road & Bridge and Traffic Operations – both more than 15 years in the making – to the continued investment of ARPA funds in critical infrastructure, every accomplishment reflects our shared commitment to serving the public. We were also proud to assist the City of Sebring with its HGTV project, showcasing the creativity and community spirit that make Highlands County stand out.

Looking ahead to FY 2026, we'll see the completion of several projects, including the expansion of our Animal Services facility, an addition to the Emergency Operations Center (ARPA funded) to better support residents during disasters, and a much-needed jail expansion to improve safety and operations. None of this progress would be possible without the hard work and dedication of our employees, our community partners, and the residents who continue to shape the future of Highlands County. Thank you for your leadership, collaboration, and ongoing support. Together, we are building a stronger, more connected Highlands County – a place we are all proud to call home.

*Laurie Hurner*

### Highlands County statistics

**ESTABLISHED: 1921**

**COUNTY SEAT: Sebring**

**AREA: 1,106 square miles**

**POPULATION: 109,778**

**MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME: \$55,581**

**MEDIAN AGE: 54.4**

Sources: U.S. Census, Data USA

# HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

## ORGANIZATION CHART



**Highlands County citizens**



**COMMISSIONER D1**  
Kevin Roberts



**COMMISSIONER D2**  
Don Elwell



**COMMISSIONER D3**  
Scott Kirouac



**COMMISSIONER D4**  
Arlene Tuck



**COMMISSIONER D5**  
Chris Campbell



**COUNTY ATTORNEY**  
Sherry Sutphen

Assistant County Attorney  
Public Records Management



**COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR**  
Laurie Hurner

Capital Projects  
Legislative Affairs / Grants  
Public Information



**ASST. COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR**  
J.D. Langford



**PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER**  
Karen Clogston



**BUSINESS SERVICES**  
Tanya Cannady

Human Resources & Risk Management  
Office of Management & Budget / Non-Ad Valorem  
Procurement



**PARKS & FACILITIES**  
Brandon Gunn

Facilities  
Multi-Sports Complex  
Parks & Recreation



**COMMUNITY PROGRAMS**  
Ingrasherese Gardner

Children's Advocacy Center  
Healthy Families Highlands  
Housing  
Human Services  
Libraries  
Office of County Probation  
Veteran Services



**PUBLIC SAFETY**  
Chief Kelly Duppenhaller

Emergency Management  
EMS Billing  
Fire Rescue



**ROAD & BRIDGE**  
Jonathan Harrison

Asphalt Plant  
Invasive Plant Management  
Natural Resources  
Road & Bridge Operations



**DEVELOPMENT SERVICES**  
Leah Sauls

Building  
Code Enforcement  
Economic Development  
Planning & Zoning  
Tourism Development



**SOLID WASTE**  
Mark Lawrence

Landfill  
Recycling Facility



**ENGINEERING**  
Laura Borgesi

Engineering Operations  
GIS / Addressing  
Stormwater & Drainage  
Surveying  
Traffic Operations  
Transportation



**UF/IFAS EXTENSION OFFICE**  
Kati Lawson

4-H Youth Development  
Agriculture  
Horticulture  
Livestock  
Natural Resources

# HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

## ADMINISTRATION

County Administrator Laurie Hurner and Assistant County Administrator J.D. Langford have executive powers to implement all decisions, ordinances, motions and policies and procedures set forth by the Board of County Commissioners.



**COUNTY  
ADMINISTRATOR  
LAURIE HURNER**

Administration includes:

- Capital Projects
- Executive Assistant
- Senior Administrative Assistant & Grants Coordinator
- Public Information Office



**ASST COUNTY  
ADMINISTRATOR  
J.D. LANGFORD**

### RESPONSIBILITIES

- Provides policy and fiscal recommendations to the Board
- Presents a proposed annual County budget to the Board for consideration
- Performs ongoing financial and operational analysis
- Manages an annual budget in excess of \$200 million
- Oversees more than 440 County employees
- Makes recommendations on all matters of public policy before the Board

### HIGHLIGHTS

A Highlands County Strategic Plan was created, and was approved and adopted by the Board of County Commissioners.

Successfully advocated for and received the following Legislative appropriations:

1. \$500,000 for the Lake Placid Fire Station
2. \$1.3 M for a Countywide Master Stormwater Plan

# CAPITAL PROJECTS

The Capital Projects division serves Highlands County by providing efficient guidance for planning, design, architecture, construction management, budget, and scheduling for all building infrastructure capital projects. Working with various County departments and municipalities, Capital Projects has achieved significant success in the past year.





**CAPITAL PROJECTS  
MANAGER  
TIFFANY GUNN**

 **2** **EMPLOYEES**  
FULLY STAFFED

 **12**  
**TOTAL PROJECTS**

 **\$44.25 M**  
**PROJECT BUDGET TOTALS**  
**\$20.9 M ENCUMBERED**

 **\$220,000**  
**APPROXIMATE SAVINGS  
ACROSS ALL PROJECTS  
USING COUNTY FORCES**

**WORKING WITH**  
 **10**  
**CONTRACTORS**  
 **12**  
**ARCHITECTS / ENGINEERS OF RECORD**

**CHALLENGES**

- Funding for new projects
- Property acquisition

 **882**  
**TRADE PACKAGE  
SUBMITTALS**

 **1,332**  
**REQUESTS FOR  
INFORMATION SUBMITTALS**

 **150+**  
**OAC & PROJECT UPDATE  
MEETINGS / SITE VISITS**

Budget amendments **4**

Signed contracts **2**  
SEMCO, and EO Koch

Projects in construction phase **9**  
Avon Park Tax Collector expansion, Animal Services, Unit II expansion, EOC expansion, Landfill building, Jail expansion, Road & Bridge Main expansion, EOC warehouse, Jail chiller

Completed projects **3**  
Avon Park Tax Collector expansion, Unit II expansion, Animal Services

Upcoming 

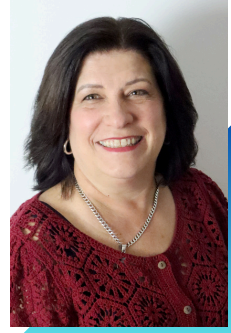
Invitation to Bid for Spring Lake Fire Station, Sebring Fuel Station groundbreaking, EOC warehouse installation, new chiller installation at the Jail

# GRANTS COORDINATOR

The County has approximately 30 active state grants over 10 departments covering multiple grant years, depending on the grant award letter. These grant funds have all been allocated and require quarterly and annual reporting.

Some of these grants are:

- Matching (require the recipient to contribute a certain amount of their own funds)
- A one-time allocation (funds provided for a specific project with no expectation of future funding)
- Capital (used for major physical investments like building construction or purchasing large equipment)
- Project grants (funds specific projects with defined objectives and timelines)



**GRANTS COORDINATOR  
CRYSTAL GOTTSCHALK**

## FEDERAL GRANTS

Merchant McIntrye, the County’s federal grant consultant, is working with County staff on the following large-scale grant opportunities.

### \$3-5 million

#### **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION DISASTER SUPPLEMENTAL GRANT**

MM is working with the County Economic Development team to develop a Readiness project in the \$250,000 to \$500,000 range that would support pursuing an implementation grant between \$3-5M in the future.

### \$1-25 million

#### **U.S. DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION BUILD GRANT**

MM is working with the County Engineer and staff to develop a proposal to address surface transportation and stormwater drainage issues. Planning grants are available in the \$1-5M range, and capital grants are available in the \$1-25M range.

## AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN ACT (ARPA) GRANTS

ARPA projects require quarterly reporting, coordinated with the County’s ARPA consultant, Accenture LLP.

Approximately 15 ARPA grants fund several county projects, including the EOC expansion and upgrade; storage facility for emergency items; Veterans Services community outreach; and Healthy Families household assistance, to name some.

### \$14,188,301.74

**ARPA FUNDS SPENT SINCE 2021**

### \$715,915.72

**ARPA FUNDS SPENT IN QUARTER 2 OF 2025**

# PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE

The office's mission is to maintain open communication with the public to help residents keep up with what is happening in their community and also give them a better knowledge of the ways the Board serves the community. This is done through the County's website, print materials, social media accounts, community outreach events, partnerships with local communicators, and interactions with local media.

The primary goals of the office are to:

1. Promote County services
2. Liaise with the media
3. Act as the single source of qualified, accurate information during a disaster



**PUBLIC  
INFORMATION  
OFFICER  
KAREN CLOGSTON**

 **2** **EMPLOYEES**  
FULLY STAFFED

 **276** Direct media interactions and information requests handled

 **150+** News advisories, releases and public notices detailing County activities prepared and issued

 **400+** Graphic design deliverables created to promote County projects and departments

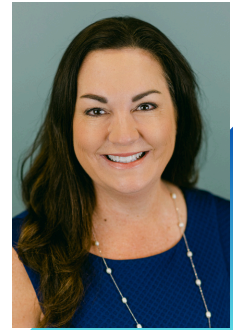
 **106,000** Maintained and grew Highlands County's Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Nextdoor, and YouTube account following

- Communicated disaster preparedness information to help residents prepare for hurricane season and other disasters via community outreach events, newspaper articles/columns, podcasts, radio interviews, social media and the County website.
- Participated in 14 preparedness presentations.
- Hosted the fourth annual Citizen's Preparedness Academy.
- Updated and distributed over 5,000 copies of the 2025 Highlands County All-Hazards Guide at County offices and libraries and community events.
- Went to 25 trainings, both virtual and in person.
- Produced the monthly County Connection newsletter, a publication by and for Highlands County employees.
- Supported County GIS and Public Safety staff and the Highlands County Sheriff's Office with promotion of the Diverse Needs registry through social media.
- Supported the Florida Department of Health in Highlands County with public awareness by sharing over 20 news releases and public safety advisories.
- Began County website redesign project, estimated to be done by April 2026.

# HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

## BUSINESS SERVICES

The Business Services department is responsible for all business-related activities of the Board of County Commissioners. Staff work in coordination with each department and the Clerk of Courts to ensure that the day-to-day operating needs of all Board departments are met.



**DIRECTOR  
TANYA CANNADY**

Business Services includes the following divisions:

- Human Resources and Risk Management
- Office of Management & Budget / Non-Ad Valorem Assessment
- Procurement



Business Services staff educational degrees include 2 master's degrees, 5 bachelor's degrees, 2 associate degrees, 1 certified public accountant, 1 certified public manager, 1 certified district manager, and various certifications and certificates.

### ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Central Square software upgrade approved
- \$15 per hour Countywide minimum wage approved
- Fire Assessment Study conducted and completed for the first time since 2017
- Attended local job fairs at South Florida State College and School Board
- Hosted five blood drives with 36 total participants, equaling about 4.5 gallons of Blood
- Completed 1,074 safety trainings Countywide
- Risk Management Coordinator Kristina Fyfe was named Professional of the Year by Preferred Insurance Trust
- 329 employees participated in the Kick Off to Wellness Fair
- Implemented an online public portal for District community center building rentals
- Complied a master list of contracts and subscription-based information technology arrangements
- Secured loan proceeds of \$12 million to finance the County jail expansion

# HUMAN RESOURCES & RISK MANAGEMENT



**HR MANAGER  
SHERRI BENNETT**

Human Resources is dedicated and responsible for serving the personnel needs of County departments. Staff actively coordinates the recruiting, interviewing, hiring, new employee orientation, performance evaluation process, discipline process, and separation/retirement needs of employees. Staff oversees the County benefits program, which includes participation from all constitutional offices and several outside government agencies.

HR promotes wellness, manages employee personnel records, and processes payroll bi-weekly. Other areas of responsibility include the Insurance Committee and Employee of the Quarter.

Risk Management is responsible for overseeing the County's casualty, general liability, property and workers compensation policies and claims process.



# OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT & BUDGET NON-AD VALOREM ASSESSMENT



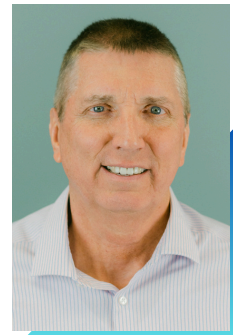
**200+**

**TRACKS & MONITORS  
ALL OPEN PROJECTS**



**135**

**BUDGET AMENDMENTS  
PREPARED**



**OMB MANAGER  
DAVID NITZ**

OMB administers the annual budget process for the Board by:

- Holding budget review meetings with Administration and individual departments
- Conducting public workshops and required hearings, allowing the Board and the public to make comments and recommendations on the budget prior to adoption
- Preparing and presenting the Capital Finance Strategy (CFS) as well as the Fee Schedule for Board approval

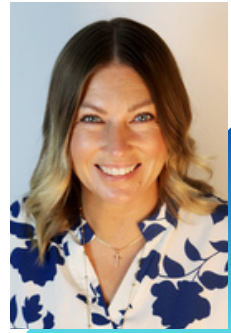
Staff collaborate with the Clerk of Court’s Accounting team to manage budgets, revenues, and expenditures, monitor major funds, and assist departments with budget amendments to transfer or realign funds.

Non-Ad Valorem Assessment staff collaborate with the Tax Collector, Property Appraiser, and consultants to manage and generate assessment rolls, send public hearing notices for assessment changes, and assist with hearings for the districts.

	<b>FY 23-24</b>	<b>FY 24-25</b>
<b>TOTAL BUDGET</b>	\$187,785,578	\$221,198,343
<b>MILLAGE RATE</b>	7.8500	7.6000
<b>BUDGETED PROPERTY TAXES</b>	\$53,758,765	\$57,613,117
<b>BUDGET AMENDMENTS</b>	195	135
<b>CFS TOTAL BUDGET</b>	\$33,328,204	\$46,493,893
<b>ACTIVE PROJECTS</b>	237	218
<b>ASSESSMENT BILLINGS</b>	\$16,366,173	\$17,969,274
<b>CERTIFIED ROLLS</b>	14	14

# PROCUREMENT

The division assists departments with all their procurement needs. Staff manage the formal procurement processes (Invitations to Bid, Requests for Purchases and Formal Written Quotes) and work alongside departments to ensure that all purchases are made in compliance with Florida Statutes and County policy. Additionally, staff manage the purchase order process, oversee the purchasing card process and assist with property sales, annual inventory, daily maintenance of spend control, new user training and provide monthly audits for sales tax and monthly reconciliation in Fin Plus.



**PROCUREMENT  
MANAGER  
STACY QUILLEN**



# HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

## COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

The Community Programs department is responsible for all community-based programs and activities of the Board of County Commissioners. It is a collaborative hub for resources (federal, state, local, private and non-profit) designed to aid economically-disadvantaged individuals and families in our community. Staff provide assistance to Highlands County residents, which contribute to their quality of life.



**DIRECTOR  
INGRASHERESE  
GARDNER**



Community Programs includes the following divisions:

- Children's Advocacy Center
- Healthy Families Highlands
- Housing
- Human Services
- Libraries
- Office of County Probation
- Veteran Services

## CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTER

The nationally accredited Ruth E. Handley Children's Advocacy Center serves as the site for coordination of the multi-disciplinary team response to child abuse in Highlands County.

The CAC is a child-focused, facility-based program where representatives from law enforcement, child protective services, the state attorney's office, mental health therapists, family advocates, and other disciplines collaborate to make decisions about investigation, treatment, intervention, and prosecution of child abuse cases that result in the reduction of trauma to these children.



**CAC MANAGER  
GAIL WERLEY**

# CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTER



## 2,602 CLIENT ENCOUNTERS AND SERVICES LOGGED

 **125**  
CLIENT  
NEW CLIENTS

 **176**  
FORENSIC  
INTERVIEWS

 **766**  
MENTAL  
HEALTH  
SERVICES

 **12**  
MDT CASE  
REVIEW  
SESSIONS

### A FORENSIC INTERVIEW IS

a recorded, child-friendly conversation led by a trained professional to gather information about suspected abuse or neglect. Observed by members of the multi-disciplinary team, it minimizes repeated questioning and supports law enforcement while prioritizing the child's safety.

### A FORENSIC MEDICAL IS

a non-invasive evaluation by a trained medical professional to assess a child's health, document possible abuse, and offer reassurance. These exams support investigations while prioritizing the child's care and comfort.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The CAC maintains accreditation by the National Children's Alliance, with re-accreditation in 2028.
- In February 2025, the CAC, along with the HCSO K-9s and their handlers, hosted 25 K-9s and their handlers from around the state. Deputies and the dogs were shown around the CAC and spent time in the family room to learn how the Highlands County CAC operates and provides comfort to child victims and their non-offending caregivers.
- Provided 25 CAC clients with Thanksgiving dinner and 75 CAC clients with Christmas gifts thanks to community donations.

# CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTER

## HIGHLIGHTS

In April, CAC participated in numerous community events to raise awareness for Child Abuse Prevention Month, including:

1. Coordinating the annual kick-off event
2. Recording a podcast to share how the community plays an active role in protecting children and promoting safe, nurturing environments
3. Social media awareness campaign across three platforms - Facebook, Instagram, and Nextdoor
4. Interactive story times at our libraries
5. Attending and hosting seminars and trainings
6. Presenting proclamations to the Board and all three local governments to formally recognize April as Child Abuse Prevention Month

Using grant funds, staff attended the following conferences and trainings:

1. Annual International Conference on Child and Family Maltreatment
2. Myra Strand Advocate training
3. Specialized training at South Florida State College to learn more about child sex offenders and how to protect children from abuse
4. Annual Symposium on Child Abuse
5. Annual International Trauma Conference
6. NCA Leadership Conference
7. American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children Colloquium

## MEMBERS OF THE MULTI-DISCIPLINARY TEAM

- Highlands County Sheriff's Office
- Lake Placid Police Department
- Sebring Police Department
- Department of Children & Families
- State Attorney's Office
- Children's Home Society
- Peace River Center
- Department of Juvenile Justice
- Guardian Ad Litem
- Champion for Children Foundation
- School Board of Highlands County

# HEALTHY FAMILIES HIGHLANDS

Healthy Families is a nationally accredited home-visiting program that supports expectant parents and parents of newborns facing challenging life circumstances. Through voluntary, one-on-one coaching, education, and guidance, the program helps families strengthen parenting skills, understand their child's developmental needs, practice positive discipline, manage daily stress in healthy ways, and set meaningful short- and long-term goals – all to improve child well-being and family self-sufficiency.



**PROGRAM MANAGER  
CYNTHIA ACEVEDO**



**60**

**FAMILIES SERVED**



**137**

**CHILDREN SERVED**



**919**

**HOME VISITS**



**52%**

**INCREASE  
SINCE 2024**

**8% HOME VISITS WITH FATHER PARTICIPATION**  
**20% AFTER-HOUR HOME VISITS**



**3,113**

**INDIVIDUAL CONTACTS**



**202**

**INTERACTIONS WITH  
PARTNER AGENCIES**



**124**

**COMMUNITY  
REFERRALS MADE**

## MAJOR HIGHLIGHTS

- Healthy Families hosted its annual school supply drive in August 2025.
- HFH staff participated in program awareness and outreach activities at five community events and four program presentations to partner agencies.
- Staff member participated in a Home Visiting Program Panel at the annual community Baby Shower event, where program services were promoted.
- Worked with the PIO and three enrolled families to create video testimonials.
- 99% of participants were free of maltreatment during services and one year after completion.
- 82% parents increased self-sufficiency by getting a job, completing job training, furthering their education, or securing stable housing.

# HOUSING

Highlands County receives funding through the State Housing Initiatives Partnership program (SHIP), which produces and preserves affordable home ownership and multi-family housing. The program is designed to help extremely low, very low and moderate income individuals/families. The program provides 0% loans for down payment assistance, home repair/owner-occupied rehabilitation, foreclosure intervention, and grants for rapid rehousing/rental assistance.



**PROGRAM MANAGER  
KIMBERLY WEAN**

SHIP also provides gap-filling assistance to developers of affordable housing who are awarded construction financing through other state or federal housing programs to construct or rehabilitate affordable rental units.



**FUNDS EXPENDED \$692,726.86**

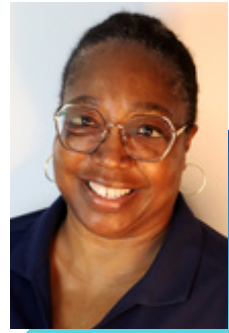
## MAJOR HIGHLIGHTS

Highlands County developed and held a series of Affordable Housing outreach events in each municipality during July to educate residents and community stakeholders about the County’s affordable housing programs. These outreach events were a key opportunity to build awareness, engagement, and collaboration across the community in support of affordable housing efforts.

1. Residents learned about available housing strategies and programs outlined in the Local Housing Assistance Plan (LHAP); met Highlands County SHIP staff; and got information on housing assistance programs.
2. Local nonprofit affordable housing organizations that attended included Avon Park Housing Authority, Florida Nonprofit Housing, Hiccoria Pines, Habitat for Humanity – Highlands, Highlands County Housing Authority Inc., Volunteers of America, and the Heartland Coalition for the Homeless (Continuum of Care Agency for Highlands County).

# HUMAN SERVICES

Human Services staff provide support and assistance to Highlands County residents by connecting them to the following available services within the community as well as providing direct services when available:



**COMMUNITY PROGRAMS SPECIALIST  
TONYA MARSHALL**


- **Indigent cremation:** Providing direct cremation for an indigent person who dies within the County.
- **Health Care Responsibility Act:** HCRA requires counties to pay for indigent hospitalization when it occurs in a hospital outside of the county.
- **Prescription assistance:** funded by the Coast2Coast Rx Card, this service provides life-sustaining medications to uninsured and low-income citizens of the county.

Eligibility for all three services is based on resources (income and assets) and a determination of need.

 **1** **EMPLOYEE**  
FULLY STAFFED

 **70**  
**APPROVED CREMATIONS**  
**\$55,801.64**  
**FUNDS EXPENDED**

 **4**  
**MEDICATIONS PROVIDED**  
**\$53.99 FUNDS EXPENDED**  
**1 PERSON ASSISTED**

 **14** **1 APPROVED**  
**13 DENIED**  
**HCRA APPLICATIONS RECEIVED**  
**\$4,341.09**  
**FUNDS EXPENDED**

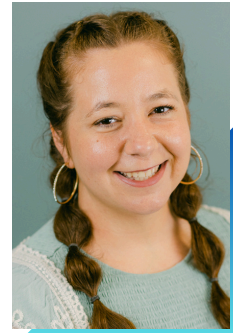
Heart of Florida Legal Aid (HOFLA) provides family law legal services to financially eligible residents of Highlands County who are at or below 125% of the federal poverty guidelines with limited assets. The Human Services division provides administrative support.

 **25**  
**CASES**

**CUSTODY / VISITATION** **3**  
**DIVORCE / SEPARATION / ANNULMENT** **13**  
**PATERNITY** **4**  
**DOMESTIC ABUSE** **4**  
**MINOR GUARDIAN / CONSERVATORSHIP** **1**

# LIBRARIES

The mission of Highlands County's three libraries, which are part of the Heartland Library Cooperative, is to provide Highlands County residents with enhanced access to library materials and library services, and making sure people have access to whatever their need may be.



LIBRARY MANAGER  
VIKKI BROWN



**AVON PARK  
PUBLIC  
LIBRARY**

100 N. MUSEUM AVE.



**SEBRING  
PUBLIC  
LIBRARY**

319 W. CENTER AVE.



**LAKE PLACID  
MEMORIAL  
LIBRARY**

205 W. INTERLAKE BLVD.



## HIGHLIGHTS

E-BOOK AND AUDIOBOOK PLATFORM USAGE



**63,218**

USES IN 24/25

## YOUTH PROGRAMS



**460** YOUTH PROGRAMS



**15,121** PARTICIPANTS

## ADULT PROGRAMS



**179** ADULT PROGRAMS



**1,104** PARTICIPANTS

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH EFFORTS



**23**



EVENTS



**906**

BOOKS DISTRIBUTED



**1,229**

PEOPLE REACHED

# LIBRARIES

## BY THE NUMBERS



# 279,702

ANNUAL CIRCULATION TRANSACTIONS



**2,549**  
AUDIOBOOKS



**225,917**  
BOOKS



**1,245**  
BOARD GAMES



**23,731**  
DVDS



**2,749**  
VIDEO GAMES

**5,707 SESSIONS**  
ON MOMETRIX AND  
UNIVERSAL CLASS,  
OUR TWO LESSON  
OR ACCESS-BASED  
PLATFORMS



# 6,400



# 2,783 or 77%

INCREASE OVER PREVIOUS YEAR

NUMBER OF SUMMER READING PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS



# 14,939

NUMBER OF PATRON COMPUTER USES



# 2,342

NUMBER OF NEW PATRONS REGISTERED



# 2,442

TOTAL REGISTERED PATRONS



# 3,920.50

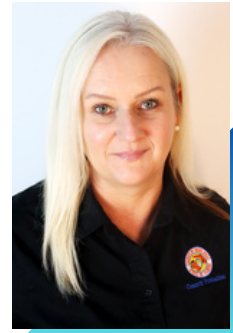
VOLUNTEER HOURS LOGGED

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Updated website through the Heartland Library Cooperative
- Acquired newer hotspots for patrons and updated several patron computers
- Staff created an emergency guide to help inform staff decisions, and a full building guide to ensure all staff and volunteers know important information
- Staff improved communication and teamwork at the annual staff development day
- Building received important maintenance face lifts with fresh coats of paint

# OFFICE OF COUNTY PROBATION

Misdemeanor Probation counselors enhance public safety by monitoring offenders' compliance with supervision conditions and providing resources and services necessary to help them transition from prison or jail to the community. The Office of County Probation became a part of Community Programs in November 2023.



**CHIEF PROBATION COUNSELOR  
LISA VANECEK**

Staff also perform the following functions:

- Collect victim restitution, fines, court costs, and supervision fees
- Refer probationers to counseling and resource agencies as needed
- Assign probationers community service hours to worksites
- Monitor probationers who have been ordered to the Behavioral Health Program



**18-91** AGES OF CLIENTS SUPERVISED



**3,989** HOURS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE

Over **62%** of Misdemeanor Probation cases are:

- Battery **11%**
- DUI **39%**
- Petit theft **13%**

The other **38%** include resisting arrest, driving without a license, etc.



## HIGHLIGHTS

- Misdemeanor Probation met with the Highlands County Sheriff's Office to exchange information to bridge the gap in services.
- A new software management system allows staff to access program files in the office, in court, and out in the field and eliminates the need for paper files.

# VETERAN SERVICES OFFICE

The Veteran Services Office serves the veteran, and/or family, by providing services and assisting in the application for additional benefits through the Department of Veterans Affairs. Such benefits may include disability compensation, non-service connected pensions, information regarding home loan certification, funeral or burial reimbursements and VA medical enrollment. Staff also assist with benefits offered by Highlands County and state or federal governments.



COUNTY VETERAN SERVICES OFFICER  
DENISE WILLIAMS



# VETERAN SERVICES OFFICE



The mission of the Highlands County Veteran Services Office is to honor and serve the veterans, service members, and their families by providing professional advocacy, compassionate assistance, and dedicated support. We connect veterans and their dependents with the benefits, resources, and services they have earned through their service to our nation – ensuring their well-being, dignity, and successful reintegration into civilian life.

## MAJOR HIGHLIGHTS

- As a mark of interdepartmental collaboration, the CVSO worked with the Housing division to secure County and State funds to repair the home of a Vietnam combat veteran. These advocacy efforts not only prevented the veteran's homelessness but also underscored the devastating effects of PTSD and the importance of community partnerships in intervention.
  1. Department of Agriculture helped with a new roof
  2. Local businesses provided plumbing assistance and lawn mowing services
  3. The Long-Term Recovery Group provided temporary housing
- **CHALLENGE:** In October 2024, Hurricane Milton impacted Highlands County.  
**SUCCESS:** VSO staff worked directly with the Florida National Guard to reach affected residents.
- Proclamation designating November 2024 as Veterans Appreciation Month.
- Staff created a triage tracker to manage non-standard service requests, such as home modifications, handicap ramps, and the distribution of donated medical equipment.
- A Client Satisfaction/Feedback Survey was developed to better glean the needs of the veterans served. Responses from the surveys guide service improvements.

## IMPORTANT STATISTICS

Veterans make up 11.9% of Highlands County's population.



According to the Fiscal Year 2024 Geographic Distribution of Veterans Affairs Expenditures (GDY), the total direct funds paid from the Department of Veterans Affairs to veterans in Highlands County was **\$77,090,502**. This reflects the broad economic impact of veteran-related services on our local community.

# HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

## COUNTY ATTORNEY

The County Attorney's Office serves as the primary legal advisor to the Board of County Commissioners, the County Administrator, County departments, the Supervisor of Elections, and various committees and boards under the control of the Board of County Commissioners. The County Attorney's Office ensures that all legal obligations of the County are met, including, but are not limited to:



**ATTORNEY  
SHERRY SUTPHEN**

- Review and draft ordinances and resolutions
- Review and draft policies and procedures
- Review, negotiation, and draft all Contracts on behalf of the County
- Interpretation of state, federal, and local laws and regulations
- Provide legal support for real estate acquisitions and capital projects
- Provide civil litigation support, including representing the County in various legal proceedings
- Serve as the public records custodian of Highlands County

### HIGHLIGHTS THIS YEAR

- Operational support for Hurricane Milton recovery: The department played an important role in supporting Emergency Operations Center efforts before, during, and after Hurricane Milton, providing guidance on emergency declarations and legal issues during disaster recovery
- Policy and ordinance developments: gained approval of an ordinance updating County boards and committees, laying groundwork for full restructuring
- Board and committee engagement: staff attended more than 400 county-related meetings, including County Commission, Planning & Zoning, code enforcement magistrate hearings, and internal meetings to support operations and ensure compliance with legal requirements such as Sunshine Law and public records law
- Contracts: successfully negotiated agreements for several construction projects including the EOC expansion, Road & Bridge expansion, a new Sebring fuel station, and the installation of Tourism kiosks in central locations in our County. Additionally, several grant agreements were approved, as well as agreements securing funds from the National Opioid Settlements to be paid directly to Highlands County, implementing an approved plan for the utilization of funds for the benefit of our County



**18**

**ORDINANCES  
DRAFTED/REVIEWED**



**177**

**RESOLUTIONS  
DRAFTED/REVIEWED**



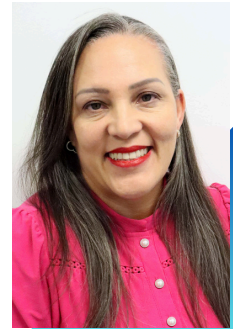
**150**

**CONTRACTS  
DRAFTED/REVIEWED**

- Ongoing legal education: Sunshine Law training provided to County advisory boards and committees, and employees; the County Attorney gave a presentation on Agri-Tourism at the annual Florida Association of County Attorneys Conference in June and the Records Manager gave a presentation regarding proper communications during a blackout crisis at the Governors Hurricane Conference in May
- The Board recognized the Records Manager for her 20 years of service to Highlands County

## RECORDS MANAGEMENT

The Records Management division is part of the County Attorney’s Office and is dedicated to ensuring the proper handling, storage, and retrieval of the County’s public records in compliance with state and federal regulations. This division also provides crucial support for County operations and legal activities, including facilitating records requests, organizing training programs, coordinating compliance with subpoenas and other court-ordered requests, and managing special projects.



**RECORDS  
MANAGER  
GLORIA RYBINSKI**

### HIGHLIGHTS THIS YEAR

- The Records Manager is a member of the Florida PIO Deployment Team and was deployed to Sarasota County after Hurricane Milton; She was recognized at the 2025 National Information Officers Association Conference and was awarded a PIO Deployment Team Mobilization Award at the 2025 Florida Fire & EMS Conference
- The division coordinated a proclamation designating March 16-22, 2025, as Sunshine Week and the month of April 2025 as Records and Information Management Month to raise awareness about public records laws and transparency
- Staff represented the County at the Sunshine Fest in Washington, D.C.
- Successfully implemented the JustFOIA platform County-wide to streamline records requests. Training for County departments has been ongoing
- Supported special research initiatives for the County Attorney’s Office



**10**

**TRAININGS HELD**



**2,500+**

**PUBLIC RECORDS REQUESTS**

# HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

## DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

Development Services exists to create a quality community life for the citizens of Highlands County, which is accomplished through implementing countywide building, code enforcement, and comprehensive planning and zoning policies and regulations that will ensure that Highlands County can respond to the ever-changing needs and values of its citizens.

Development Services includes the following divisions:

- Building
- Code Enforcement
- Planning & Zoning

The department is also tasked with implementing economic development initiatives and strategies to encourage new businesses to locate here and to facilitate retention and expansion of existing local businesses with the following goals: 1) increasing job growth and the local tax base, and 2) improving the quality of life for the local community.

The following offices are responsible for these initiatives:

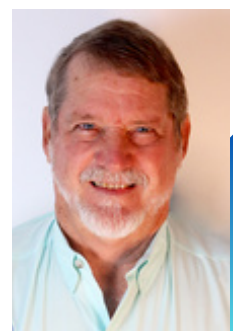
- Economic Development
- Tourism Development



**DIRECTOR**  
**LEAH SAULS**

## BUILDING

Housing starts increased in FY 2024-25, with total starts of 691 new homes, increasing 15.53% compared to last fiscal year. This increase is due to new site-built 1 & 2 family homes. Mobile home activity decreased by 33.33% over last fiscal year with 124 mobile home permits issued.



**BUILDING OFFICIAL**  
**ERIC LONGSHORE**

**10,079**  
**PERMITS ISSUED**

**25,260**  
**INSPECTIONS CONDUCTED**

# BUILDING



**\$1,744,306.58**

**REVENUE FROM PERMITS**



**\$320,914,66**

**REVENUE FROM BUILDING PLAN REVIEWS**



**\$23,050**

**REVENUE FROM RED TAGS**

# CODE ENFORCEMENT



**6**

**EMPLOYEES**  
FULLY STAFFED AT 8



Code Enforcement protects the public health, safety and welfare by thoroughly researching, analyzing and proposing creative solutions to code violations as they arise. Common code violations include: grass in the yard over 18 inches high, inoperable or unlicensed automobiles and vessels in driveways, and trash that's left out in front of a home but isn't bundled.

<b>INSPECTIONS</b>	<b>4,576</b>	<b>COMPILED CASES</b>	<b>1,340</b>
<b>VIOLATIONS</b>	<b>1,704</b>	<b>DEMOLITIONS</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>NOTICE OF VIOLATIONS</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>SPECIAL MAGISTRATE CASES</b>	<b>154</b>
<b>WARNING CITATIONS</b>	<b>419</b>	<b>REVENUE COLLECTED</b>	<b>\$292,439.67</b>
<b>CITATIONS</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>EXPENSES</b>	<b>\$151,917.25</b>
<b>CASE NOTES ENTERED</b>	<b>4,826</b>	<b>UNFOUNDED COMPLAINTS</b>	<b>369</b>

# PLANNING & ZONING

The division oversees implementation and enforcement of the Highlands County Comprehensive Plan and Land Development Regulations related to zoning, environmental clearance, and historic preservation. These ensure growth happens responsibly, with proper infrastructure and protection of natural and cultural resources.

Staff provide technical support for the Board of County Commissioners, Board of Adjustment, Planning and Zoning Commission, and Historic Preservation Commission, and contribute to multiple advisory committees and review meetings. The division also collaborates with regional planning groups, including the Central Florida Regional Planning Council, Heartland Regional Transportation Planning Organization, and local planning agencies in Sebring, Avon Park, and Lake Placid to promote coordinated, sustainable development across Highlands County.



**PLANNING & ZONING MANAGER  
CYNTHIA KRAMER**

**BOARD OF ADJUSTMENT MEETINGS** 10

**BOA APPLICATIONS** 43 115% FROM LAST YEAR

**REVENUE FROM APPLICATION FEES** \$25,625

**PLANNING & ZONING MEETINGS** 11

**REVENUE FROM APPLICATION FEES** \$26,850

**ZONING MAP CHANGES** 11

**FUTURE LAND USE CHANGES** 2

**COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AMENDMENTS** 2

**LAND DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS AMENDMENTS** 2

**DEVELOPMENT PLAN REVIEWS** 51

**REVENUE FROM DPR** \$10,000



**ENVIRONMENTAL CLEARANCE REPORTS** 233



**LAND CLEARING PERMITS** 635



**\$171,300** 30% FROM LAST YEAR  
**MITIGATION FEES COLLECTED FOR THE COUNTY'S CONSERVATION TRUST FUND**



**PHONE CALLS** 8,489



**IN-PERSON INQUIRIES** 3,424



**EMAIL INQUIRIES** 930



**HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION MEETINGS** 5

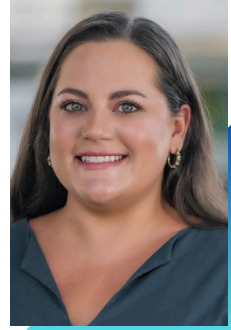
**PERMITTING APPROVALS** 2,440

**REVENUE FROM PERMITS** \$146,688 17% FROM LAST YEAR



# ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economic Development focuses on growing Highlands County's economy by supporting local business expansion, attracting new employers, and creating jobs through collaboration with community partners — all to strengthen long-term growth and improve quality of life for residents.



**EXECUTIVE  
MANAGER SARAH  
BETH MURPHY**

## BENCHMARKS

**2024 POPULATION ESTIMATE: 109,778 UP 2% FROM 2023**

**AVERAGE ANNUAL WAGES: \$47,886 UP 3.5% FROM PREVIOUS YEAR**

**REGISTERED BUSINESS COUNT: 2,560**

**GRANT DOLLARS RECEIVED BY DIVISION: \$130,000**

**ONGOING PROJECTS: 5**

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND PROJECTS

Economic Development staff actively worked on 25 new or expanding business projects during the 24-25 fiscal year. These projects fall into various industry categories including manufacturing, distribution, agriculture, aviation, and tourism. Out of these projects, three have chosen Highlands County and are actively working through the development process. Between these three projects, at least 320 jobs will be created, and capital expenditures will reach an estimated \$150 million.

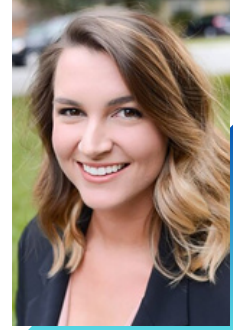
Staff has focused on assisting small businesses and two programs were launched: Highlands County Quick Start Series and Thrive in Highlands. The Quick Start Series hosted 24 small business owners looking to better their business, in partnership with our local Small Business Development Center. The Thrive in Highlands program is a pilot business incubator program in partnership with Paramount Pursuits, and four entrepreneurs were chosen to participate, with the program finishing in FY 25-26.

Economic Development also led several special and/or ongoing projects:

- **Countywide Broadband initiative** - leads the Local Technology Planning Team and works with the state to vet new internet service providers; works with IBT Group USA to complete the ARPA-funded broadband project slated for 2026
- **Viewpoint with Dennis Quaid** - a public television feature on Highlands County as a wonderful place to live and work; the segment is set to air in 2026
- **An updated strategic plan** - actively working on implementing that plan with a goal of creating a more diverse and vibrant economy for Highlands County

# TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

The Tourism Development division is solely funded through the Tourist Development Tax, a 5% tax on overnight stays by visitors six months or less. The Tourist Development Council, or TDC, is a nine-member board appointed by the Board of County Commissioners to serve as stewards of the Tourist Development Tax collections.



**TOURISM MANAGER  
REAGAN FULTZ**

From October 2024 through September 2025, Highlands County was the destination for 540,200 overnight trips, totaling over 1.7 million visit nights; the TDC and their consultants had a direct hand in bringing 22 sporting events to Highlands County, generating 11,860 room nights and an estimated economic impact of over \$5 million.

**EARNED MEDIA OUTREACH** through public relations partner, MuchPR:



**ARTICLES AND BROADCAST  
SEGMENTS**



**ESTIMATED VIEWS**



**COMBINED POTENTIAL  
AUDIENCE**

**HGTV Season 3 Hometown Takeover** exposure and momentum:

- Staff collaborated with Sebring, Lake Placid, and Avon Park officials to maximize the resulting national exposure, holding frequent team meetings that continue to strengthen regional coordination and amplify tourism development countywide.
- In partnership with its marketing consultants and local partners, staff advanced multiple initiatives to strengthen the county's visitor experience and branding: 1) completing a redesign of VisitSebring.com, 2) producing new photo and video content, 3) launching targeted digital media campaigns, and 4) launched the Downtown Sebring Home Town Takeover Tour through the Bandwango digital pass platform.

**Sports tourism** remains one of Highlands County's strongest tourism sectors:

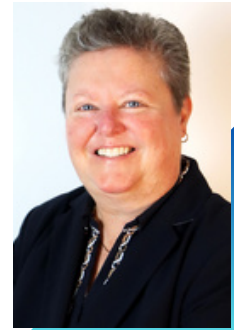
Sports tourism boosts local hotels, restaurants, and retailers through visitor spending. To plan for future growth, the TDC worked with Huddle Up Group on a Countywide Sports Facility Study, outlining current assets and opportunities to expand venues and attract more tournaments to Highlands County. The report serves as a shared planning resources for the TDC and its local partners.

# HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

## ENGINEERING

The Engineering department handles surveying, development review, project design and permitting, and construction project management. Staff review construction plans and plats of residential and commercial developments proposed for unincorporated areas of the County to ensure they conform to County code, and they review and approve work performed in public rights-of-way in the unincorporated areas.

Staff work closely with the Road & Bridge department to oversee the planning and construction of major roads and bridges, and provide technical and professional assistance, as needed, to all County departments.



**DIRECTOR /  
COUNTY ENGINEER  
LAURA BORGESI**

Engineering includes the following divisions:

- Engineering Operations
- GIS/Addressing
- Stormwater/Drainage
- Surveying
- Traffic Operations
- Transportation

## ENGINEERING OPERATIONS

In FY 24/25, Engineering submitted 2 grant applications, totaling \$3,604,329, for transportation-related grant programs.



**248**

**DEVELOPMENT SERVICES APPLICATIONS**



**386**

**UTILITY PERMITS  
REVIEWED**



**369**

**UTILITY PERMITS  
ISSUED**



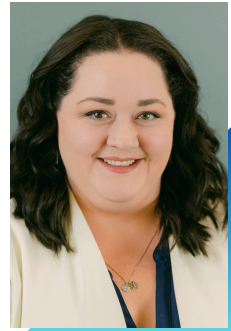
**621**

**DRIVEWAY / OTHER RIGHTS-OF-WAY  
PERMITS ISSUED**

# GIS/ADDRESSING

The mission of the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) division is to steward high-quality, secure, comprehensive, and easily accessible geospatial data and to provide services that empower and support the business needs of all County departments, its community partners, and the general public.

GIS is used to enhance the delivery and efficiency of public services, support sustainable and resilient growth, foster informed and effective decision making, and maintain an exceptional quality of life in Highlands County.



**GIS MANAGER  
CARLEY  
FITZGERALD**



**33,423**

**INTERACTIVE MAP VIEWS**



**6,000+**

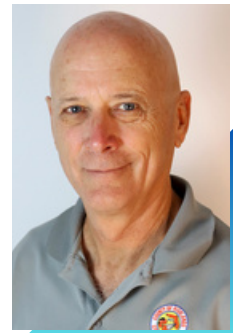
**SITE ADDRESS POINTS VERIFIED,  
CORRECTED OR EDITED**

## GIS HIGHLIGHTS THIS YEAR

- A GIS Addressing Coordinator was hired.
- Staff performed community outreach for GIS awareness through GIS Day and attending the local high school career fair.
- Staff presented at GIS and Emergency Management conferences.
- GIS coordinated with multiple departments to enhance their services through GIS tools and enhancements:
  1. Created a Road Maintenance Lookup Tool, benefiting Engineering, Road & Bridge, the Clerk of Courts, and Highlands County residents
- The division supported implementation of new GIS software at the Highlands County Sheriff's Office, helping to bolster resilience, and redundancy in critical data and systems.
- Responded to Hurricane Milton with a suite of new tools and applications that improved the damage assessment process and tracking of repairs post storm.
- Upgraded hardware and software, which will improve the use of GIS technology in the County.

## STORMWATER/DRAINAGE

This division is developing a Countywide Master Stormwater Plan, which will include solutions for many reoccurring drainage issues and will help provide water quality enhancements to improve the water in Highlands County. Staff has already initiated several drainage basin studies and has been developing a list of the areas with existing concerns.



**ASST. COUNTY  
ENGINEER -  
STORMWATER  
MITCH THOMAS**

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Submitted two grant applications totaling \$900,000.
- Existing stormwater studies will be completed in FY 25/26 and will include solutions for many reoccurring drainage issues throughout the County.
- Staff is focused on compliance with the National Flood Insurance Program and Community Rating System for increasing flood insurance discounts and community education regarding the need for floodplains as well as flood insurance.
- The National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) program has been able to increase public education efforts to prevent stormwater pollution by increasing inspections of construction and industrial sites by 200%.
- 30+ drainage projects and responses to property owners completed.

## SURVEYING

The Surveying division performs many functions and works closely with all County departments to provide each with land data specific to their needs. Staff determine the limit between public and private ownership in the mapping of road rights-of-way and other County-owned lands.

The division is responsible for assisting with legal descriptions for easements and rights-of-way being vacated, reviewing legal descriptions and plats prepared by others for recording, and conducting driveway inspections.



**2,119**

**DRIVEWAY INSPECTIONS**

# TRAFFIC OPERATIONS

The division is responsible for fabricating traffic signs; maintaining traffic signals and street lighting along most of the State road system within Highlands County; and installing, maintaining, repairing and inspecting all traffic control devices – signs, signals, pavement markings and devices – placed on, over, or adjacent to County-maintained streets or highways to regulate, warn and guide traffic.



 **14** EMPLOYEES  
FULLY STAFFED

 **19,217**

**SIGNS FABRICATED,  
INSTALLED OR REPAIRED**

 **1,328**

**TRAFFIC SIGNAL AND  
STREETLIGHT REPAIRS /  
REPLACEMENTS**

Traffic Ops crews maintain 44 out of 45 traffic signals in Highlands County, 775 street lights and about 70 school zone flashers. They also maintain approximately 40,000 signs – from stop signs, street signs, warning signs and regulatory signs to information signs, school signs, object markers and recreational markers.

 **598,204**

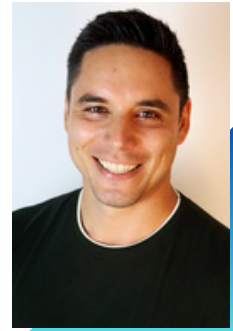
**CONTRACTED / INSTALLED LINEAR FEET OF ROADWAY STRIPING**

 **3,299**

**CONTRACTED / INSTALLED SQUARE FEET OF THERMOPLASTIC  
LINING AND RAISED PAVEMENT MARKERS**

# TRANSPORTATION

The Transportation division oversees development review, project design, permitting, and construction inspections for roadway, sidewalk, and multi-use path projects. By pursuing grant opportunities and coordinating closely with the Road & Bridge department, the division identifies countywide transportation needs and determines which projects can be completed in-house. This year, a Transportation Planner joined the team to support long-term planning, policy development, and studies that address the county's growing transportation demands.



**ASST. COUNTY  
ENGINEER -  
TRANSPORTATION  
VLAD BILUKHA**

## PROJECTS

- Memorial Drive (Pompano Drive to Sebring Parkway) sidewalk
- West College Drive Phase I & II roadway improvements
- New Traffic Operations building
- Sebring Parkway Phase IV
- ADA Hammock Road multi-use path
- Arbuckle Creek Road (Bridge to Riverdale Road)
- Beacon Avenue widening
- E.O. Douglas Avenue sidewalk repairs (Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard to School Street)
- Catfish Creek Road Bridge rehabilitation
- County Road 64 resurfacing
- West Interlake Boulevard sidewalk (Catfish Creek Road to Tangerine Avenue)
- U.S. 98 & Birch Avenue left turn lane
- County Road 623 reconstruction (Mini Ranch Road to Peters Road)
- Lake Josephine Drive reconstruction (Orange Blossom Boulevard to east of Sentinel Point Road)
- Sebring Parkway Phase I improvements (U.S. 27 to Scenic Highway)
- Sebring Parkway Phase I improvements (Scenic Highway to Roundabout)
- Sebring Parkway Phase I improvements (Roundabout to North Ridgewood Drive)
- County Road 29 turn lane – school zone improvements
- North Main Avenue-CR 17 pedestrian crossing
- Avon Park Estates roadway improvements

# HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS PARKS & FACILITIES

The Parks & Facilities department is responsible for overseeing the maintenance and repair of all facilities owned and operated by the Board of County Commissioners, including facilities for County departments and constitutional offices, parks, and boat ramps. Staff oversee all maintenance issues for county buildings, including indoor air quality, heating, ventilation, air conditioning, electrical, plumbing, alarms, custodial services and groundskeeping.



**DIRECTOR  
BRANDON GUNN**

Parks & Facilities includes the following divisions:

- Facility Management
- Parks & Recreation
- Multi-Sports Complex

## FACILITY MANAGEMENT

Services provided by Facilities staff include large and small building improvements, routine and preventative building maintenance, custodial services, and project management.



**2,034**



**WORK ORDERS OUTSIDE OF  
NORMAL MAINTENANCE TASKS**



**92.08%**

**COMPLETION RATE FOR  
THE FISCAL YEAR**



**\$10,845**

**FACILITY RENTALS REVENUE**

**FOUR COMMUNITY CENTERS, AGRI CIVIC CENTER  
AUDITORIUM AND THREE CONFERENCE ROOMS**



**7.38%**

**DECREASE OVER PREVIOUS YEAR**

# FACILITY MANAGEMENT

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- Agreement with Brightly Software was approved for Asset Management Software and Calendar Event Manager module.
- HVAC replacements and chiller repairs were completed at Lake Placid Road & Bridge, Sebring Library, Natural Resources, Solid Waste, Annex Building, Government Center, Station 36, Veteran Services, Courthouse, and the Emergency Operation Center.
- Renovations were completed at Avon Park Tax Collector's Office, Avon Park Road & Bridge Unit 1 Bunkhouse, and the second floor of the Annex Building.
- Roof restoration was performed at the Sebring health department - the County received State reimbursement in the amount of \$529,979.07.
- Roof repairs were completed at Landfill Scale House, Avon Park Tax Collector's Office, Station 18, Station 10, and Station 39.
- New drain fields were completed at the Emergency Operation Center, Sebring health department and Station 41
- Major sewage repairs made at the Housing division.
- The Courthouse had several large-scale repairs to the elevators including software upgrades, fire pump repairs, and generator repairs.
- Access Control Equipment for State Attorney Door Access was completed.
- Sliding doors repairs were made at the Tax Collector's office at the Government Center.
- Facade repairs were made at the Courthouse and Government Center.
- Elevator Modernization Project is ongoing.
- Remodeled blue building at 618 S. Commerce Ave. for Housing division use.
- Executed an agreement for \$389,668.58 for Courthouse facility enhancements.
- Approved a new RFP solicitation for the maintenance and repair of County owned generators.



**\$285,331**

**STATE REIMBURSEMENT FOR  
COURTHOUSE WEATHERPROOFING  
PROJECT**



**\$2.6 M**

**TWO FEMA SUBMITTALS FOR NEW  
GENERATORS AT COURTHOUSE AND  
GOVERNMENT CENTER**

# PARKS & RECREATION

The division provides maintenance at 84 recreational facilities, county buildings, lots, and right-of-way areas. Groundskeeping areas include:



**36**

**BOAT RAMPS**



**32**

**COUNTY BUILDINGS**



**35**

**DOCKS AND FISHING PIERS**



**5**

**BALL FIELDS**



**4-MILE HAMMOCK TRAIL**

## MAJOR PROJECTS

- The first phase of Memorial Trailhead Park was completed through a FRDAP grant. Plumbing for phase two to construct restrooms has already been completed as well.
- A new playground system was installed at the Lorida Community Center, and the restrooms were restored and reopened.
- Reconstructed new docks at Lake Adelaide, Lake Apthorp, Lake Olivia, Arbuckle Creek (Burnt Out Bridge), Lake Pioneer, and Lake Sebring along with a rebuild of Istokpoga Park Dry Island Boardwalk.
- Revitalization of the Sebring health department landscape.
- New fence was built at Windy Point Park.



**\$195,545**

**REIMBURSEMENT FROM FRDAP GRANT FOR FIRST PHASE OF MEMORIAL TRAILHEAD PARK**

## MULTI-SPORTS COMPLEX

The Highlands County Multi-Sports Complex is 52-acres with nine playing fields. The fee structure for this fiscal year was changed to include TDC events.



**\$47,673**

**TOTAL REVENUES**



**\$8,765**

**FEES WAIVED**



**128%**  
**INCREASE OVER PREVIOUS YEAR**

# MULTI-SPORTS COMPLEX

## IMPROVEMENTS INCLUDED

- Irrigation pumps for green space fields replaced
- Extensive repairs to wheelchair lift completed

## EVENTS HELD



**6** ONE-DAY SOFTBALL TOURNAMENTS

**9** TWO-DAY SOFTBALL TOURNAMENTS

**1** THREE-DAY SOFTBALL TOURNAMENTS



**2** LACROSSE EVENTS



**6** FOOTBALL AND 7-ON-7 GAMES

- 15 Senior leagues
- Annual Special Stars Tournament
- Upper-Level Soccer Club plays year-round soccer practice and 40 games
- Highlands FB Soccer Club holds practices
- Sebring High School Cross Country team practice and games June through October with one race
- Sebring High School boys and girls soccer teams practice from October through January
- Hill Gustat Middle School soccer held three games
- Sebring Middle School soccer held four games and 27 practices
- Avon Park Middle School soccer held one game
- YMCA held six-week soccer program with practice, five games days and one tournament

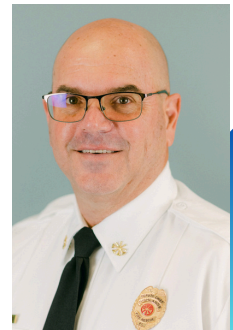
# HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

## PUBLIC SAFETY

The Public Safety department is responsible for the Board of County Commissioners' emergency response.

Public Safety includes the following divisions:

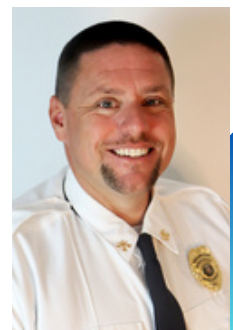
- Emergency Management
  1. Administration
  2. Fire Prevention
  3. Fire Suppression
  4. Training
- EMS Billing
- Fire Rescue



**DIRECTOR & FIRE CHIEF JAMES DUPPENTHALER**

## EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Emergency management is the organization and coordination of resources and responsibilities to prepare for, respond to, recover from, and mitigate the effects of disasters and emergencies. We were able to obtain two new drones through a \$50,000 Florida Department of Law Enforcement grant, increasing our fleet to four.



**DIVISION CHIEF COREY AMUNDSEN**



# EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

## DAY-TO-DAY OPERATIONS

- Reviews all emergency plans for assisted living facilities, nursing homes, hospitals, surgical centers, and behavioral homes in Highlands County
- Inspects hazardous material facilities
- Oversees and manages more than 30 generators for all Public Safety facilities, including Fire Rescue/EMS stations, shelters, communications towers (7), and the Emergency Operations Center
- Maintain/monitor the County's 7 WeatherStem weather stations
- Initiates and maintains all state and federal EM grants
- Manages Highlands County's Local Mitigation Strategy Work Group
- Reviews, updates, and maintains a list of all community stakeholders, critical facilities, Points of Distribution sites, gas stations, and mobile home/RV parks



**3 MORE  
COMING SOON**

## MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENT

**\$3,460,163**

### TOTAL REIMBURSEMENTS FROM PREVIOUS ACTIVATIONS

- Completion and approval of the County's Local Mitigation Strategy 5-year plan by FDEM and FEMA
- Corey Amundsen received his Florida Professional Emergency Manager certification through the Florida Emergency Preparedness Association, which requires a set of rigorous qualifications be met, including experience, exercises/operations, specialized training and documented contributions

## ONGOING PROJECTS

- Emergency Operations Center expansion, move-in by February 2026
- EOC warehouse
- Training program for all County staff

## EMS BILLING

The division is responsible for processing, verifying and maintaining the EMS patient transport data. The consultant then uses this data for billing transport fees adopted by the Board. The consultant and staff review and report on collections, adjustments and write-offs.

# FIRE RESCUE

Highlands County Fire Rescue is a full-service, consolidated fire department with 106 career personnel and 98 volunteers and provides emergency services utilizing 18 stations.



**22,478**

**CALLS FOR SERVICES**



**22,472**

**911 CALLS FOR EMERGENCIES**



**12,949**

**PEOPLE TRANSPORTED TO ER**



**.11%**

**INCREASE OVER PREVIOUS YEAR**



**369**

**CRITICAL PEOPLE**

## CREWS DISPATCHED MOST FREQUENTLY FOR:

- Public assist: 1,651
- Fire alarms: 518
- Illegal burning: 134
- Vehicle fires: 32
- Brush/wood fires: 170
- Fall injuries: 3,420
- Breathing difficulties: 1,696
- Generalized sickness: 4,751
- Chest pain: 1,238
- Motor vehicle collisions: 739

## NEW ADDITIONS

- 24 new members

## FIRE PREVENTION

- 877 inspections  **137%** INCREASE OVER PREVIOUS YEAR
- 234 plans reviewed
- 72 public education events

## OTHER NOTABLES

- ALS-equipped engines
- Received apparatus
  1. 4 Rescue units
  2. 2 pumper tankers
  3. 2 command vehicles
- Replaced
  1. Lifepak 35 monitors
  2. Ventilator equipment

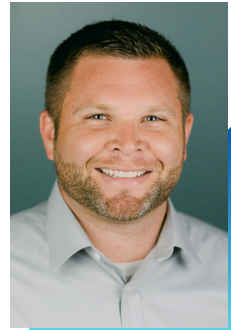
## FUTURE NOTABLES

- Groundbreaking of Station 23 (Spring Lake)
- Construction of Station 36 (Lake Placid)
- Addition of 6 personnel
- Grant funding secured for bunker gear, SCBA (self-contained breathing apparatus), gear extractor, EMS, and opioid response

# HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

## ROAD & BRIDGE

The Road & Bridge department is responsible for the maintenance and repair of approximately 1,121 miles of roadway with drainage, approximately 36 bridges, 34 miles of sidewalks and 3.33 miles of guardrails to deliver a safe and dependable transportation network. The department includes the following divisions:



**DIRECTOR  
JONATHAN  
HARRISON**

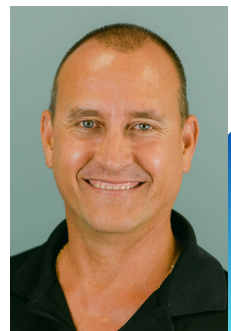
- Road & Bridge Operations
- Road Maintenance
- Bridge & Concrete
- Construction
- Maintenance Shop & Warehouse
- Invasive Plant Management
- Natural Resources



**102 EMPLOYEES**  
FULLY STAFFED AT 107

## ROAD & BRIDGE OPERATIONS

The division handles resurfacing and road reconstruct projects and routine right-of-way maintenance operations, including mowing, repairing potholes, cleaning maintained right-of-way drainage ditches and tree trimming.



**R&B OPERATIONS  
MANAGER  
CHRIS PRUZINSKY**



**8.9**

**MILES OF COUNTY  
ROADS RESURFACED**



**6,348**

**TONS OF ASPHALT USED  
FOR RESURFACING**

**14,597**

**TONS OF ASPHALT  
PRODUCED AT PLANT**



**946**

**WORK REQUESTS FOR ROAD AND  
RIGHT-OF-WAY MAINTENANCE**



**23,342**

**ACRES MOWED/MAINTAINED**

# ROAD MAINTENANCE

Broken down into three units, Unit 1 staff maintain 63.87 miles of unpaved roads and 256.23 miles of paved roadways within the areas of Avon Park and north Sebring. Unit 2 maintains 532.46 miles of unpaved and 378.29 miles of paved roads within the areas of Sebring, portions of Lorida and north Lake Placid. Unit 3 maintains 52.46 miles of unpaved and 315.76 miles of paved roads within the areas of Lake Placid, Lorida, and Venus, and oversees the Shell Pit.



**UNIT 1 SUPERVISOR  
JAMES GOINS**



**UNIT 2 SUPERVISOR  
HENRY HIGH**



**UNIT 3 SUPERVISOR  
JOHN BROWN**



**SUPERVISOR  
SCOTT GWYNN**



## COMPLETED ROAD PROJECTS



## MILES OF SHELL/DIRT ROADS GRADED

Annual excavation and mitigation monitoring reports for the County Shell Pit and the County Marl Pit were submitted to the appropriate regulatory agencies.



# BRIDGE & CONCRETE

The Bridge and Concrete Crew provides routine maintenance for 36 bridges, which includes mowing and minor guardrail repairs, and for over 35 miles of sidewalks and multi-use paths. Staff also construct driveway segments during road projects.

## ROAD & BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION

The Construction Crew assists with the cleanup of illegal dump sites. All illegal dump debris was taken to the County landfill and disposed. Crews also gathered GPS information for illegal dump sites that can be input into the Cartegraph Asset Management Software System. This information provides County Administration with a better understanding of where to focus law enforcement efforts to combat illegal dumping.



**29**



**\$18,029**



**141%**

**ILLEGAL DUMP SITES CLEARED**

**FISCAL IMPACT**

**INCREASE OVER PREVIOUS YEAR**

## MAINTENANCE SHOP & WAREHOUSE

Preventative maintenance is performed on all County fleet units as well as vehicles from the Highlands County Sheriff's Office, all fleet units from Emergency Medical Services, fire districts, and the State Attorney's Office.



**1,189**

**REPAIR WORK REQUESTS**



**508**

**PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE PERFORMED ON FLEET UNITS**



**SUPERVISOR  
DONNIE GOINS**

County Warehouse staff get vehicle and equipment titles and tags, manage the parts warehouse facility, and maintain all three fueling sites. Fleet maintenance welding staff also repair aluminum handrail damaged along County right-of-ways after vehicle crashes.



**41,552**

**FUEL TRANSACTIONS**



**720,601.41**

**GALLONS OF DIESEL AND GAS DISPENSED**

# MAINTENANCE SHOP & WAREHOUSE

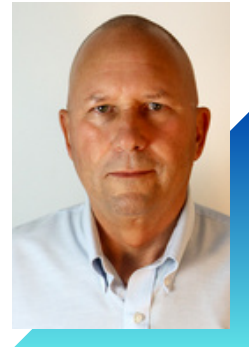
## GASOLINE/DIESEL USAGE AMOUNTS AND COST

SEPT.	UNLEADED/ TRANSACTIONS	USAGE/ GALLONS	DIESEL/ TRANSACTIONS	USAGE/ GALLONS
24/25	\$3.50 / 27,954	354,216.50	\$3.50 / 13,743	366,384.91
23/24	\$3.50 / 28,767	362,230.10	\$3.50 / 14,305	401,687.91

## INVASIVE PLANT MANAGEMENT

The division works to protect parks and local public waterbodies from exotic and invasive plant species that pose a threat to the habitat of the ecosystem. Only water bodies that are normally accessible by floating vessels fall under this division's maintenance responsibility.

Routine maintenance application of chemical herbicides is done to help reduce vegetation growth in canals, ponds, lakes and ditches to minimize drainage flow restrictions and assure design or natural conveyance capacity. All herbicide chemicals are approved through both Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). Staff also complete the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission State Work Plan Invasive Plant Management by spraying 32 of 36 approved State waterbodies. Highlands County is one of many local government agencies' to be approved for FWC's state-funded program, which designs, funds, coordinates, and contracts invasive nonnative aquatic plant control efforts in Florida regarding public waters. FWC also ensures that beneficial native aquatic plants in our Florida ponds, lakes and rivers are protected through its permitting programs and funding research.



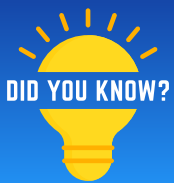
**SUPERVISOR  
CHRIS MAYHEW**

# NATURAL RESOURCES

The division supports in protecting, managing, and restoring environmental lands and wildlife habitats throughout the County. Natural Resources staff also maintain two properties, the 55-acre Grassy Lake Scrub and the 1,350-acre Sun 'n Lake Preserve for conversation and future mitigation purposes for Highlands County. Staff, in coordination and cooperation with state and federal environmental agencies, also supports in protecting, managing, and educating the public regarding Highlands County natural lakes and water bodies. Additional collaboration involves local volunteer citizens in collecting water quality samples and data to support and monitor Highlands County aquatic ecosystems.



**MANAGER  
DAWN RITTER**



The Grassy Lake Scrub is a mitigation site for the federal endangered sand skink and blue-tail mole skink. This property has allowed the County to use mitigation credits for County projects impacting each skink.

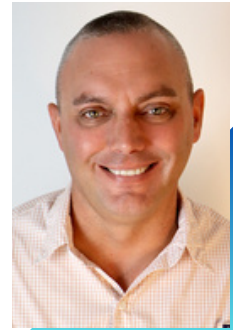
## ACTIVITIES

- To bolster community support, staff held a County-wide pond-naming contest for the five ponds in the Sun 'n Lake Preserve.
- Working on the community-based Ridge to River Conservation Planning Study to establish a conservation program that will guide the protection of the County's natural resources. Numerous workshops and three public hearings were held to raise public awareness of the project.
- Manages nutrient reduction projects, such as the Lake June-in-Winter Catfish Creek Best Management Practices project, to improve Highlands County lakes.
- Collects monthly water samples for monitoring the water quality of Highlands County lakes.
- Conducts vegetation surveys to assess the viability and needs of aquatic habitat.
- Works with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission on aquatic habitat restoration projects, such as lake plantings, in efforts to engage with and educate the public on our natural lakes and water bodies.
- Developing a plan to upgrade and make recreational improvements to transition the primitive Sun 'n Lake Preserve to a more public-friendly park.

# HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

## SOLID WASTE

The Board approved the increase of the solid waste assessment from \$229.74 to \$236.36 per dwelling unit in July 2025 for the upcoming fiscal year 2025/2026, in line with the waste collection hauler's contracted annual increase. This is necessary to fund the increased costs of operations and materials. The construction of the new 17-acre cell at the Class 1 landfill was completed in September 2025.



**DIRECTOR  
MARK LAWRENCE**

 **22 EMPLOYEES**  
FULLY STAFFED AT 23

 **142,326**

**TONS OF SOLID WASTE  
COLLECTED**

 **40,313**

**HOUSEHOLDS SERVICED  
BY FLORIA WASTE  
SOLUTIONS**

 **840  
INCREASE  
SINCE 2024**

 **898.14**

**TONS OF RECYCLING COLLECTED**

 **79** **AVERAGE NUMBER OF WEEKDAY  
RECYCLING CUSTOMERS**

**112** **AVERAGE NUMBER OF SATURDAY  
RECYCLING CUSTOMERS**

 **76%**  
**INCREASE SINCE 2024**

### MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENT

**RECYCLING CENTER ON SKIPPER ROAD RE-OPENED SEPT. 1, 2025.  
MONTH OF SEPTEMBER 2025 TOTALS:**

- TVs: 56
- Computers: 15
- Laptops: 16
- Printers: 23
- Batteries: 42
- Paint: 340 gallons
- Gas: 162 gallons
- Diesel: 60 gallons
- Oil: 81 gallons

# HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS UF/IFAS EXTENSION OFFICE

The Cooperative Extension Service is a partnership between the land grant institutions in each state and local county governments. The University of Florida and Florida A&M University work together to oversee Extension programming in Florida. Highlands County's Extension office is at the Bert J. Harris Jr. Agricultural Center, 4509 George Blvd., in Sebring.



**DIRECTOR  
KATI LAWSON**

 **6** **EMPLOYEES**  
WHO COVER THESE AREAS:



**4-H YOUTH  
DEVELOPMENT**



**HORTICULTURE**



**AGRICULTURE**



**NATURAL  
RESOURCES**



**LIVESTOCK**

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

 **411**

**FIELD AND OFFICE  
CONSULTATIONS**

 **18,278**

**PARTICIPANTS AT GROUP  
LEARNING EVENTS**

 **163**

**EDUCATIONAL  
MATERIALS CREATED**

**112** VOLUNTEERS WORKED WITH FOR A TOTAL OF  **5,863** VOLUNTEER HOURS



The mission of the Extension service is to provide science-based information from the university to the public.

# ANNUAL REPORT

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## Highlands County

Board of County Commissioners

