

ENTERTAINMENT

UNDERWOOD, WINANS TAKE ACM TO CHURCH

Gospel legend, country superstar join forces.

CeCe Winans and Carrie Underwood brought the Academy of Country Music Awards to church. The dynamic duo joined forces for a top-notch, powerful performance that was the show's highlight, though the event still had two more hours. Underwood kicked off the performance with "Amazing Grace" and "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," then Winans joined in, matching her strong vocal performance. **A10.**

NATION & WORLD REPORT

Nation: Half of all U.S. adults have received at least one COVID-19 shot, marking another milestone in the nation's largest-ever vaccination campaign. **A13**

Economy: California regulators are stepping up oversight of Pacific Gas & Electric after finding the nation's largest utility neglected the maintenance of its electrical grid. **A17**

INSIDE

World News	A2
Florida News	A5
Lottery	A4
Local News	A6

Top of the News

INSIDE THE ISSUES SHAPING OUR COMMUNITY

Health Care Advances Even Amidst Pandemic

SERVING RESIDENTS NOW

NEW CARE CENTER UNDERWAY

Left: The Villages Health, the largest provider of primary care medicine in the community, is expanding its reach with construction of the Lake Deaton Care Center. A fall opening is anticipated.

Right: The Villages Health, the largest provider of primary care medicine in the community, is expanding its reach with construction of the Lake Deaton Care Center. A fall opening is anticipated.

The Villages is experiencing another wave of growth in an effort to help meet the medical needs of southern residents.

R

Residents can prepare to welcome new health care opportunities in near future at a variety of levels in The Villages, despite trying economic conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic over the last year and a significant bump in impact fees on new construction in Sumter County that goes into effect this summer. The community's largest primary care provider, as well as multiple speciality care options are expanding their reach, and more hospital beds could be the horizon. Long-established practices like Tri-County Heart

LOCAL NEWS

Refreshed Amenities Bring Together Community

Wildwood's new parks and recreation manager is developing big ideas for the 'small town.'

By RACHEL STAMFORD
Daily Sun Staff Writer

Sonya Hoppes fell in love with Wildwood after she flew her family 1,000 miles across the country to work there because it reminded her of the small Illinois town where she was born and raised. However, Hoppes began her new job as Wildwood Parks and Recreation manager during the height of the pandemic. With her department short-staffed and lockdown restrictions making it difficult to plan events, Hoppes had an unpredictable yet rewarding road ahead of her. "As I start to live here, it's so refreshing that Wildwood reminds me of that small town-feel," Hoppes said. "It's a good place and I'm proud to be here. I'm proud of what this city is accomplishing and honored to be part of a team that works so well together." Hoppes began her position at Wildwood Parks and Recreation in October. Though Gov. Ron DeSantis had moved the state into Phase 3 of reopening by lifting all capacity limits on restaurants and businesses the month before, there were still difficulties

Please See **PARKS, A6**

THAT'S AMAZING

MEMPHIS ZOO WELCOMES BABY DEER FROM RARE SPECIES

Considered extinct in the wild, the Memphis Zoo welcomed a baby Pere David's Deer last month. The zoo is one of a handful of U.S. zoos that houses the rare species. The male fawn was born at the zoo on March 27 amid severe storms passing through the Mid-South. Due to his arrival in the midst of the wild weather, zoo staff gave the fawn the name Gale. Gale, born to mother, Piper, and father, Freddie, is the second Pere David's Deer born at the zoo in the past two years. "Gale is doing well and getting to know the other members of his herd, including his sister April, who just turned 1 year old this month," zoo staff said. — The Associated Press

RESOURCES & REOPENING

ON THE HORIZON

What's Happening With COVID-19 Vaccination Efforts

FLORIDA COVID-19 CALL CENTER

The Florida Department of Health's COVID-19 call center is available 24/7 at 866-779-6121. Or email COVID-19@flhealth.com

COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENTS

Sumter: 352-569-3102
Marion: 352-629-0137
Lake: 352-589-6424

VACCINE DISTRIBUTION IN TRI-COUNTY AREA

Click: myvaccine.fl.gov
Call: Sumter, 866-201-7196; Lake, 866-201-6909; or Marion, 866-201-6768.
Eligible: Age 16-up.
Pharmacies: CVS, cvs.com; Publix, publix.com; Walgreens, walgreens.com; Walmart, walmart.com/COVID vaccine; Winn-Dixie, winndixie.com.

WHERE AREA VETERANS CAN GET THE VACCINE

Homebound World War II and Korean War veterans can visit floridavets.org/homeboundveterans/ or call 850-487-1533, ext. 9.
Veterans: North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System at American Legion Post 347. Registered patients can call 352-548-6000, ext. 103755.

THE LATEST COVID-19 VIRUS CASES IN FLORIDA

As of Saturday
6,473: New cases of COVID-19 in Florida
8.7%: Test positivity rate
2,168,901: Total infections in state since pandemic began; 35,109 total deaths

Tri-County Numbers
Sumter: 9 new cases
Lake: 99 new cases
Marion: 51 new cases

LOVIN' THE LIFESTYLE

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VOLUME 24 | ISSUE 109

HEALTH

Continued from A1

Building and Village Dermatology & Cosmetic Surgery at Laurel Manor Professional Plaza are expanding in the community. New practices like the Dermatology Institute & Skin Cancer Center at Brownwood and LifeStance Health, a provider of mental health services at the Morse medical building, opened in the first quarter this year.

Medical Support Surge

Around two dozen health care providers are either in the planning stage, under construction or preparing for an opening just within the first three months of the year in The Villages or on the periphery in Wildwood, according to a Daily Sun review of lease notices and city, county and state planning records.

The Villages Health, which already operates six primary care centers and two specialty care centers, will add a ninth when Lake Deaton Plaza Care Center opens. It will be located near the newly opened Chitty Chatty Bridge across State Road 44. A fall opening is anticipated, said Bob Trinh, CEO of The Villages primary and multispecialty care provider.

“It’s a primary care center for people who move into the new area south of SR 44 and then establish themselves as residents,” he said. “We want to establish with them as their primary care provider. Once they’ve established themselves, they typically need a physician. So, we want to be here when people move in to establish themselves and help take care of them to enjoy the lifestyle that brought them here to The Villages.”

This project was started before three newly elected county commissioners voted to increase road impact fees on such new construction projects in Sumter County by 75%. Health providers planning future health care facilities will have to weigh the added startup costs this creates on new construction, especially large-scale projects

like a proposed new hospital. The existing projects, like the new care center for The Villages Health, offer some insight into why medical revenue grew year over year by about 182% in 2020 in just Sumter County, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to state revenue data. Lake County medical revenue grew by about 50% during the same time period. In contrast, total medical revenue for all 67 counties decreased by about 2%.

Anchor on Health Care Landscape

One of the big contributors to Sumter’s gain is the Center for Advanced Healthcare at Brownwood, a 285,000-square-foot multispecialty care center that opened in June 2020, said Scott Renick, The Villages director of commercial development.

“Toward the end of last year, late third quarter and early fourth quarter, the patient traffic at the CAHB was significantly more than we expected,” he said. “It was at a level that was surprising to most of us, given what was going on with social distancing and that the vaccines hadn’t been rolled out yet. That’s the single biggest health care delivery in 2020, and the recent past.”

This next new phase is just the start of something exciting, Renick said.

“We have providers in many different specialties that are expanding and serving the community,” he said. “Outside the CAHB, we’re seeing steady demand from all types of providers for health care space. When you look at the nature of our demographics, we’re going to have a higher percentage of needs across almost all subspecialties.”

UF Health Presence Expands

Resident demand for quality health care explains why The Villages entered into a partnership with UF Health, which operates UF Health Shands at Gainesville and UF Health Jacksonville, to build



Michael Johnson | Daily Sun

The Center for Advanced Healthcare at Brownwood, a 285,000-square-foot multispecialty care center opened in June, and patient traffic has exceeded expectations.

a new acute-care hospital and a health care campus in the development area west of Marsh Bend Trail and north of County Road 470, said Marlene O’Toole, a member of the UF Health Central Florida advisory board. The advisory board serves UF Health The Villages Hospital, UF Health The Villages Hospital Freestanding Emergency Department and UF Health Leesburg Hospital.

UF Health, which has yet to break ground on the project, already is sending newly minted physicians to serve internships at The Villages and Leesburg hospitals, said O’Toole, a former state representative who lives in the Village Mira Mesa.

“That’s one of the biggest benefits we’re going to get from the UF Health partnership,” she said. “We’re getting physicians coming out of school with the latest greatest knowledge when they graduate.”

What causes O’Toole to pause, however, is her recollection of The Villages health care industry in 2005, when she and husband Ed moved to Mira Mesa. She recalls having to drive to Leesburg for her

health care needs.

“There were less than a handful of physicians in The Villages at that time and nearly all of them located on the east side in Lady Lake,” she said.

Another Acute Care Possibility

Another hospital provider may be eying Sumter County. Although HCA officials did not respond to inquiries, the national hospital group and parent company of Ocala Health, did acquire multiple, adjoining properties in the Trailwinds development of Wildwood for \$18.8 million in March with an entitlement from city officials to allow for up to a 300-bed hospital. HCA has not filed a site plan with the city.

A longtime physician is at work on his growth plans. Dr. Thi Tran, a board certified dermatologist who founded Village Dermatology & Cosmetic Surgery in 2004, was recruited by The Villages to relocate his practice from Tampa.

Patient demand remains constant, Tran said. “We have a full schedule,” he

said. “But we still can accommodate people’s needs. Now, they’re being accommodated faster rather than waiting longer for an appointment.”

Tran’s plans for a new building in Buffalo Ridge Plaza targets not only his needs as a physician, but also accommodates the increasing resident demand for the services of his wife, Emma Kumley, owner of The Movement Studio in Oxford and a nationally certified Pilates teacher.

“From a medical standpoint, the growth we’re seeing is south of SR 44, and will continue as The Villages expands and builds new homes southward,” he said. “It parallels population growth in Sumter County and correlates not only with medical but all business groups across all spectrums.”

What complicates matters for Tran is the increased medical practice competition for health care workers.

“With this expansion, our biggest challenge as a small office is to compete for competent staff,” he said. “I take pride in our staff, but it’s a challenge. It takes a lot of time to put together a competent team.”

That challenge comes even as the number of health care workers grew considerably over the past 10 years in just The Villages of Sumter County, according to the latest data available from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. Around 6,500 health care

employees worked in Sumter County as of June 30, 2020. That’s a 46% increase in five years, and a 141% increase during the previous 10 years.

Not every practice is expanding because of patient demand.

At Tri-County Heart Institute, board certified cardiologist Dr. Nitza I. Alvarez is expanding her practice to provide women with preventative heart care, said Jose Rivera-Gonzalez, office administrator. “The reason we’re growing, we’re specializing in women’s heart disease, which in this area and overall in the nation has been neglected,” he said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates 655,000 Americans die each year from heart disease and costs about \$219 billion annually in health care services, medicines and lost productivity due to death.

“Fifty percent of those deaths are preventable,” Rivera-Gonzalez said. “Dr. Alvarez’s motto is ‘prevent the stent.’ Yes, as The Villages grows, the more we’re going to grow. But we want to grow through preventative medicine by getting to patients when they’re in their 50s and 60s.”

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