



**BEFORE THEY WERE VILLAGERS | C5**  
Joe Montesano carried on the family tradition during his career as an educator.

6 a.m. 9 a.m. 12 p.m. 3 p.m. 6 p.m. 9 p.m.

56° 60° 66° 69° 63° 58°

**JEAN RACINE ON NFL | B1**  
Brady continues to perform well even at 44, recording a career-high 5,316 passing yards.



## UNIFORMS WARM UP OLYMPIANS, A11

U.S. athletes will be toasty warm as the Beijing Winter Olympics kicks off the opening ceremony with new uniforms designed by the all-American Ralph Lauren brand. The designer also designed closing ceremony looks that were unveiled in October.

The uniforms include new technology to keep players warm for the ceremony.



## Omicron's Spread Pushes Sumter's Positivity Rate Higher

### DEALING WITH COVID-19

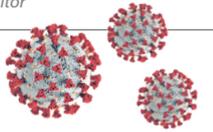
The virus' case volume and its direct impact on medical staff continue to stress both hospitals and clinics.

By CURT HILLS | Daily Sun Managing Editor

The omicron variant of COVID-19 spreads so easily from person to person that Sumter County is now staring at its highest positivity rate since the pandemic began.

It also accounts for 148 people in local hospitals Thursday, new patient and visitor guidelines at UF Health's flagship hospital and discussion about refining vaccines.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's daily tracking reports Sumter County's positivity rate, or the percentage of times those taking a test for COVID-19 receive a positive result, is at 28.8% in Thursday's numbers. Florida is



Vaccinations, staying home when sick, hand-washing, and avoiding large groups, especially indoors, remain best practices against the virus.

Please See COVID-19, A9

### OUR TOWN | TOURIST DEVELOPMENT

# Space Coast Tourism Building on Big Year

### MAJOR LAUNCHES IN 2022

**March 31:** Axiom Space launching first civilian mission to International Space Station.

**March or later:** NASA launching Artemis I deep space infrastructure with SLS rocket, Orion spacecraft.

**April 15:** SpaceX launching crewed mission to International Space Station.

**May or later:** Boeing launching delayed CST-100 Starliner uncrewed test flight to International Space Station.

Source: Kennedy Space Center



Joe Burbank | Tribune News Service

A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket lifts off in November 2021 carrying the Crew-3 astronauts in the new Crew Dragon Endurance spacecraft.

A record number of rocket launches from Florida in the last two years sparked record tax collections for the Space Coast.

By MICHAEL SALERNO | Daily Sun Senior Writer

Looking up into the sky is a big tourism draw for Florida. But why, in a state of theme parks, beaches and natural wonders? The answer is rocket launches. And Florida's Space Coast had a record number of missions in each of the last two years. With record launches came record tourist development tax collections. The Brevard County Office of Tourism, Brevard County's public-private tourism marketer, reported \$16.9 million in tourist taxes in the 2020-21 fiscal year, above the pre-pandemic record of \$16 million in 2018-19. "It's bringing more people here because space launches are happening more frequently and people can plan their trips around space launches," said Meagan Happel, spokesperson for the Space Coast Office of Tourism.

Please See SPACE, A8

### ONLY IN THE VILLAGES

By James Dinan

**Don Piper returns to New Covenant United Methodist Church in The Villages this weekend, speaking soon after the anniversary of the event that changed his life.**

"It was 33 years ago this very week that I was on my way home from a church conference when my car was hit head-on by a semi-truck," Piper said. "Emergency personnel responded and pronounced me dead at the scene. A minister began praying over my body and, 90 minutes later, I returned to life."

According to Piper, he spent 90 minutes in heaven,

Please See AUTHORS, A9

### AREA CHURCHES MARK IMPORTANT MILESTONES AND PROGRESS

Live Oaks Community Church dedicated its new Woodridge Worship Center with concerts and Living Grace Church in Summerfield celebrated its second anniversary with a special worship service last weekend. **C3**

ALSO

### PICKLEBALL CHAMPS HONOR FRIEND WITH TOURNAMENT WIN

Rob Schultz and Gary Yates dressed in a fellow player's signature black attire to bring them luck. **B5**

ALSO

### AUTHORS PARTICIPATE IN LIBRARY EVENT TO CONNECT WITH READERS

Mark Twain Library hosted "New Beginnings: Read Your Way Through 2022" as appreciation for patrons. **D2**

## STATE & REGION

### FLORIDA NEWS

## MLB Rejects Plan for Split Season With Montreal, Rays Say

The Tampa Bay Rays' proposed plan to split the season between Florida and Montreal has been rejected by Major League Baseball. Rays principal owner Stuart Sternberg announced the news on Thursday. "Today's news is flat-out deflating," Sternberg said. The idea of playing in both the Tampa Bay area and Montreal has been discussed over the past several years after attempts to build a new full-time ballpark locally failed. When asked if he felt somewhat betrayed by his fellow owners, Sternberg said, "That's a word." — *The Associated Press*

1

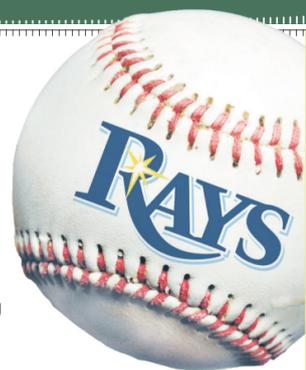
Since Sternberg took control in October 2005, the once-struggling franchise has been a success on the field but not at the box office. Despite reaching the World Series in 2008 and 2020, the Rays have annually ranked near the bottom in attendance.

2

The Rays' lease at Tropicana Field in St. Petersburg, where the team has played since its inaugural season in 1998, expires after the 2027 season. St. Petersburg mayor Ken Welch thinks a new stadium in his city remains a possibility.

3

The city of Tampa is in the mix. "All along our goal has been to keep the Rays in Tampa Bay," Tampa mayor Jane Castor said. Sternberg said the team will explore options in the Tampa Bay area. He has no plans to sell the team or request permission to explore relocation.



**LOVIN' THE LIFESTYLE**

Entertainment news today, **D2**

In recreation centers today, **D4-5**

Happening on the squares today, **D3**

What to watch on TV today, **D10**

from the front page



George Horsford | Daily Sun

**Heather King, with UF Health Precision Health Research Center-The Villages, gives a nasal swab to a client for a self-administered COVID-19 test.**

**COVID-19**

Continued from A1

expected to release its own number later today, after showing 29% last week.

The CDC rates reported Thursday are even higher in neighboring Lake and Marion counties, with 36.8% and 32.5%, respectively.

Hospital officials reported 79 COVID-19 positive inpatients at UF Health The Villages Hospital Thursday and another 69 at UF Health Leesburg Hospital. Hospitalizations from the delta variant peaked at 179 last summer.

"The numbers are still climbing," Dr. Jeff Lowenkron, chief medical officer for The Villages Health, said of local cases. "Two-thirds of those patients hospitalized are unvaccinated. The vaccinated make up 90% of the population, so the 10% of unvaccinated are making up most of the patients. Whether you like vaccines or not, they've made a huge difference."

Lowenkron said patients with mild symptoms can skip getting tested and ride it out with rest, fluids and time. Those with severe symptoms should seek medical care, he said.

The Florida Department of Health called attention to monoclonal antibody treatments offered at the Barnstorm Theater, Monday through Saturday, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. by appointments scheduled at patientportal.fl.com. Given through an IV, it is designed to block the virus that causes COVID-19 from attaching to human cells, making it more difficult for the virus to reproduce and cause harm, according to the Food and Drug Administration.

However, prevention is the desired path. Lowenkron recommends people:

- » Be fully vaccinated and boosted
- » Physical distance, especially indoors in large group settings
- » Practice frequent handwashing
- » Stay home if experiencing symptoms

The virus' high case volume and its direct impact on medical staff continues to stress both hospitals and clinics. Patients of The Villages Health, which operates primary care and specialty care centers, received an email Thursday addressing short-term staffing challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, seasonal flu and labor market challenges and asking for patients patience.

"We have almost 10% of our staff and 40% of our call center out right now," Lowenkron said. "So it may take a little longer connecting."

Citing the easy transmission or spread of the omicron variant, UF Health Shands in Gainesville began issuing Level 1 yellow medical ear loop masks to all patients and visitors on Thursday. Those entering the hospital with their own KN95 or N95 masks are allowed to continue to wear those. UF Health will consider expanding the upgraded mask guidelines to other facilities.

This highly contagious variant also recently sparked the World Health Organization's technical advisory group to suggest that researchers should start working on future vaccines or a variation of the current ones that will have high impact on prevention of infection and transmission, acknowledging the current

**AUTHORS**

Continued from A1

meeting family members and joining a choir. He told his story in the 2004 book "90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death and Life," which spent more than five years on the New York Times Bestseller List and was made into a 2015 feature film.



Piper



Lutzer

Now Piper shares his story and preaches to churches and groups all over the country through his namesake ministry. He will speak at New Covenant UMC on Saturday, Sunday and Monday during worship services and special events.

"I've known New Covenant UMC's senior pastor, the Rev. Harold Hendren, for more than 15 years," Piper said. "I've spoken at Hendren's previous churches and have appeared at New Covenant

several times, even serving as the church's artist-in-residence for about six weeks a couple of years ago. Due to the pandemic, I haven't been to the church in some time, but I always enjoy visiting The Villages."

Piper first will address the New Covenant UMC congregation at 5 p.m. Saturday, when he will share the story that inspired "90 Minutes in Heaven." Then during 9 and 11 a.m. worship Sunday, he will deliver what he describes as a message of hope.

"It's a sermon called 'Hope: Now or Later,'" Piper said. "I'll talk about how we get past the current set of circumstances, and how we find hope today and in the future."

Piper will lead a revival at 6 p.m. Sunday at New Covenant UMC. Like the three worship services, the event is open to the public, regardless of denomination or church membership.

"It will be a very evangelistic message," he said. "It will be about preparing for heaven. We've lost more than 800,000 people here in the U.S. due to COVID-19. None of them were expecting the illness, let alone to die of it. We're all one breath away from not being here, so we need to think about making our reservations for heaven."

Piper's time at New Covenant

will come to a close Monday, when he will lead a men's ministry retreat. The event is \$20 per person and registration is required at ncumcfl.com.

"This retreat is about making a difference in the world today," he said. "When it comes to church, I've found that men are not always a priority. They don't actively participate in worship, outreach or ministry compared to women. The retreat is an opportunity for men to come together to talk about their responsibility in church and faith."

Hendren said he is honored to have Piper visit this weekend. "Don Piper is an incredible speaker and author who has told his story to millions of readers, as well as in-person to thousands of churches and groups," he said.

New Covenant United Methodist Church is at 3470 Woodridge Drive, The Villages.

Christian author and preacher Erwin Lutzer makes his second appearance in The Villages area in as many years at 4 p.m. Saturday at First Baptist Church of Leesburg's Village Park Campus in Fruitland Park. He said last year's event went even better than he hoped it would.

"Given concerns about COVID-19, I would have been happy if 50 people showed up

to hear me speak," he said. "But we had 400 people gather last year, and we're hoping for something similar this year."

Lutzer is a nationally renowned minister who served 36 years as senior pastor of Chicago's historic Moody Church; he retired in 2016. He still serves as the church's pastor emeritus and hosts three national radio programs.

He regularly speaks at churches, conferences and retreats around the world and is the author of dozens of books. His latest book, "No Place to Hide: Standing for Christ in a Collapsing Culture," will be released later this year and will be the focus of his talk in Fruitland Park.

"We need to be unified in Christ, especially inside the church," Lutzer said. "We should be open to state our views without fear of reprisal."

The Village Park Campus is at 1000 Village Park Drive in Fruitland Park, near the Village of Pine Ridge. He said visiting in and around Florida's Friendliest Hometown is becoming a favorite part of his schedule.

"I come from Chicago, where everybody's in a rush, trying to get ahead," he said. "The Villages is a very welcoming community with spacious streets and friendly, trustworthy people."

**CANADIAN MEDS**  
 Save Up To 80%  
 on Your Meds Prices  
 We ship anywhere in the USA  
 Locally Owned & Operated  
 352-633-3301

**COUPON**  
**\$10.00 OFF**  
 Initial Purchase of \$100 or More.  
 CALL FOR A FREE QUOTE  
 744 S US Hwy 441 • Lady Lake, FL

**NEW IMAGE LANDSCAPING**  
 352-208-0933  
 • Hardscapes • Landscaping  
 • Rocks, Mulch, Plants, Sod

**The Good Feet Store®**  
 America's Arch Support Experts

**Enjoy cooler weather PAIN FREE**

With Good Feet Arch Supports you can relieve more than just foot pain. Stop letting your pain hold you back from getting outdoors this Fall.

*Just stop in, or call for an appointment.*

**The Villages® Community**  
 1060 Bichara Boulevard  
 (between Belk and City Furniture)  
**(352) 706-0207**  
 goodfeet.com/orlando

**We honor our veterans & military. Please ask for your special discount.**