

Legislative **UPDATE** *By Lori Fayhee*

Locally, Lee County School District held a School Bus Safety Town Hall meeting following the school bus stop death of another Lee County student. Eight-year-old Layla Aiken was hit and killed by a truck as she waited for the school bus at a bus stop in March. Twelve-year-old, Alana Tamplin, was hit and killed in January, along Durrance Road, about 7 a.m., moments before sunrise, after walking her sister to her elementary school bus. The two-lane road does not have a shoulder or sidewalk.

During the District Town Hall meeting, many citizens offered suggestions for safer stops, such as transporting students during daylight hours, marking bus stops with signs, and establishing safe waiting areas for students, however, the District has not implemented any changes. Many local volunteers, across Lee County, have taken the initiative to create safer stops. Lights for Layla, a group formed after the latest tragedy, said funds raised would go toward installing streetlights and benches at school bus stops. The Rotary Club of Cape Coral said their organization plans on working with other organizations and donors to install more benches at school bus stops in the city. The Lee County Sheriff's Office also partnered with community members to raise \$100,000 for flashing LED lights that will fasten to students' backpacks by the next school year. The sheriff's office pledged \$20,000 and the Lee County School District pledged \$10,000. Numerous residents who live near school bus stops set out benches in their yards, and groups of people have gotten together to build benches and picnic tables. The Lee County School District is working with the community to install the benches and determine the proper placement for them, although they state that the bus stops change each year. Another group, Benches for our Babes, has also distributed benches for students while they wait for the bus. The school district and Cape Coral Police have pledged to analyze the school bus stop where Layla was hit. According to the school district, it was deemed safe according to current guidelines. The district did move Layla's school bus stop and changed the bus routes so her brothers would not have to return to the spot where they watched their sister die. The district did the same for Alana Tamplin's siblings earlier this year. Alana was killed in January by a driver near her home in North Fort Myers. The district transports 49,000 students every day.

State law requires Florida school boards to establish school bus stops in the safest location and to work with municipalities to post bus stop signs.

On the heels of last years' ½ penny sales tax increase, the Lee County School Board is now promoting an increase in millage – again stating that it is for an increase in teacher salaries. At the April 23rd board meeting, Board Member Chris Patricca stated that she will be promoting this agenda.

With the new income from the ½ penny sales tax, the Lee County School District has agreed to buy 10 acres of land in Estero for \$2.5 million to build one or more schools - in Estero. The Lee County Property Appraiser's office lists the market value of the land as \$371,698. The school district states that they received two appraisals of the land listing its value at \$2.5 million. The district still is going through the process of deciding how it will use the land.

Also at the April 23rd Board meeting, the School Board of Lee County voted 7-0:

To provide direction to the School Board Attorney to request an Attorney General Opinion from the Florida Attorney General, regarding the possession of firearms by off duty certified law enforcement officers at meetings of the School Board in order to develop a legally compliant school board policy. Such request shall include questions regarding open carry, in uniform and out of uniform.

To support the "Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act" and establish that trained, certified law enforcement officers (School Resource Officers) will serve as safe school officers to implement the Act and any amendments to the Act for the protection and safety of school personnel, students and visitors. The School Board does not support the arming of teachers. Marjory Stone Douglas statue called for ALLOWING certified persons to carry concealed guns on school campuses, per County School Board approval.

Approval of the Master Service Agreement between The School Board of Lee County, Florida (School Board) and RSM US LLP, to serve as the School Board's internal audit function to comply with Section 1001.42(l), Florida Statutes, effective April 24, 2019 to June 30, 2020 for a total not to exceed amount of \$50,000.00.

Engagement of Weiss Serota Helfman Cole & Bierman as School Board Attorney for The School Board of Lee County, Florida for a period of 6 months commencing on May 1, 2019 and ending on October 31, 2019, to perform legal services for the School Board, at a cost of \$80K, following Board Attorney Robert Dodig's resignation.

At the state level:

SB 7030 makes several school safety changes recommended by the commission that examined the Marjory Douglas High School shooting in 2018. Part of this plan would ALLOW some classroom teachers to become part of the armed guardian program, if the school districts approve it. The teachers would have to volunteer, undergo psychological evaluations, and be trained by the county sheriff's office. The bill also requires school districts to establish or assign safe-school officers, and revise school district zero-tolerance policies. The bill passed in the Florida Senate, 22 to 17, but still must pass the House.

HB 7123 Will require school districts that have had successful voter referendums to share their additional funding with charter schools, passed its final committee in the House. An amendment added in the House Appropriations committee would require charter schools that receive a portion of these funds to use them for the intended purpose of the referendums. A companion bill is pending in the Senate.

SB 168 passed 22-18, Prohibiting sanctuary policies; requiring state entities, local governmental entities, and law enforcement agencies to use best efforts to support the enforcement of federal immigration law; authorizing a law enforcement agency to transport an alien unlawfully present in the United States under certain circumstances; prohibiting discrimination on specified grounds, etc.

HB 403 permits a church, synagogue or other religious institution to authorize a licensed person to carry a concealed firearm on property it owns, leases or otherwise uses, and would include religious schools. The measure was approved by a 79-35 vote, moving on to the Senate where a similar bill is pending. Current law does not prohibit a person with a concealed carry license to bring a gun to a place of worship, unless a school is also located there. The House bill changes that, but it is also voluntary.

HB 7065 the Florida Senate on Wednesday approved an overhaul of the insurance practice known as assignment of benefits (AOB). The 25-14 vote sends the measure to Gov. Ron DeSantis, who issued a statement saying he will sign it. Passage of the bill was a major victory for insurers and business groups, which have argued that "AOB" abuses and excessive litigation have driven up homeowners' insurance premiums.

SB 426 passed unanimously in the House and Senate. The bill requires that cancer would be treated like an on-the-job injury for firefighters. The bill covers the full cost of cancer treatment, and also gives firefighters disability pay and death benefits for beneficiaries. It covers 21 forms of cancer.

SJR 362 Passed 35-4 in Senate Abolishing the Constitutional Revision Commission.

SB 1552 Red Tide Mitigation and Technology Development Initiative passed 37-0.

FEMA has agreed to pay 100% of recovery costs from Hurricane Michael for the first 45 days after the storm made landfall, covering debris removal, emergency protective measures, and direct federal assistance from the day of Michael's Oct. 10 landfall to Nov. 24. After that, FEMA will return to covering 75 percent of costs. Recovery efforts are expected to exceed \$4 billion. Budget leaders are planning to set aside \$750 million in next year's state budget to allow for the time it will take for the state to receive the funds.

The Florida Senate unanimously passed a \$90.3 billion budget plan for next fiscal year, while the House approved an \$89.9 billion spending plan, about \$400 million less in total spending. Negotiations have begun on a final proposal that lawmakers will send to Gov. Ron DeSantis before their 60-day regular session ends in May. DeSantis' own budget plan is \$91.3 billion.

Differences between all three plans include education spending, water quality and the environment, and spending levels for mental health services in schools. All three proposals are above current overall state spending levels. Some detailed differences include:

—EDUCATION: The Senate measure increases per-student funding by \$1.1 billion or 4.71 percent, which comes to about \$350 more per student. The House is at \$579.3 million more per student or a 2.75 percent increase, \$167 more per student. DeSantis asked for a middle-ground number of \$224 more per student.

—ENVIRONMENT: DeSantis asked for \$625 million to fund Everglades restoration, water quality improvements, protection for natural springs and the Florida Forever land-buying program. The Senate bill is higher at \$656 million, while the House budget plan contains less than the governor wants at \$607 million.

—SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES: The House budget contains the same \$69 million that was appropriated this year by the Marjory Stoneman Douglas bill. The Senate budget boosts that amount by \$31 million, to \$100 million.

—VISIT FLORIDA — The House spending plan includes \$19 million for the state's tourism promotion office, enough to close it down by October as required by current law. The Senate provides \$50 million to keep Visit Florida operating past October and DeSantis wants it fully funded at \$76 million.

Please keep the family of County Commissioner Larry Kiker in your thoughts and prayers. We will miss Larry - his humor, diplomacy, and wisdom.