

Highlands Newspaper

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Thurs., May 13, 2021



On Tuesday, drivers lined up for their share of the \$30/cash limit gas at 4th Street Market. — Photo by Kim Lewicki

Gas shortage hits Highlands, Cashiers

Daily we are reminded how globally connected the world is these days.

Due to technology people can reach across the globe to do good, or to wreak havoc like the Ransomware attack that caused

the Colonial Pipeline system to be shutdown Friday, May 7.

According to U.S. officials, the attack on Colonial Pipeline appears to have been carried out by an Eastern European-based criminal gang named Darkside.

In a statement Friday, Colonial Pipeline said it temporarily shut down all its pipeline operations after learning it had been hit by a cyber attack on some of its “information technology” or busi-

•See SHORTAGE page 8

Town FY '21-'22 budget is \$28.4 million

Last Thursday, May 6, the town finalized its FY 2021-2022 budget – coming in at \$28.4 million – up from FY '20-'21's \$20.1 million.

An unexpectedly good fiscal year means no tax hikes or fee increases for FY 2021-'22.

The ad valorem property tax stays at 15.65 cents per \$100 valuation with 1 ½ cent of that earmarked for paving projects.

Instead of sun setting the 1 ½ cent that was earmarked for recreation for five years, commissioners agreed to keep it but to earmark it for paving instead.

The anticipated revenue from property taxes which includes \$119,736 from Jackson County residents within the Town of Highlands is \$2,829,867.

The fire tax for the coming year is also unchanged – 3 cents

per \$100 valuation.

Fire tax collection, including \$84,000 from Jackson County, which they have agreed to pay annually from now on, is expected to be \$1,147,353. These funds are being used to finance the Fire Dept. project.

The local option tax (sales tax) proceeds are expected to be \$1,200,000.

•See BUDGET page 7

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Masks are still required inside businesses, but only “suggested in outside crowded areas.” — Photo by Kim Lewicki

Commissioners lift outside mask mandate

A couple of extra issues were on the budget workshop agenda last Thursday that didn't have anything to do with navigating finances for FY 2021-2022.

First, Town Attorney J.K. Coward presented the Town of Highlands scholarship award recipients as proposed by the schol-

•See MASK page 9

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• THE PLATEAU'S POSITION •

• MAYOR ON DUTY •

Masks are now suggested in crowded areas

The wording on the masks signs downtown has been changed to read, "Masks suggested in crowded areas."

I know some may think that weak mayor caved in and changed the mask requirement. Others might say it was about time for that overreaching mayor to come to his senses about mask wearing. I didn't make the decision, the entire Highlands Board of Commissioners did.



Highlands Mayor
Patrick Taylor

All of the town's emergency orders have been made by the entire board, not by the mayor taking unilateral action. I think board action is the best path to follow when making such critical policy. I have fully supported its decisions.

At last Thursday's budget workshop, I asked the Town Manager to place the discussion of the mask requirements on the agenda. Normally, these kinds of items are not on budget workshop agendas, but during the pandemic situations change very quickly.

At the April Town Board meeting, commissioners reviewed the mask policy and left it in place, with the proviso that we would track the mask wearing issue and

revisit it periodically. Little did we know that the CDC would loosen up their outdoor mask recommendations, and that Governor Cooper would change his outdoor mask wearing order soon thereafter.

The governor issued a new order (#209) that went into effect on April 30. It basically eliminated the outdoor mask order (#180) that we enforced through North Carolina Statutes concerning states of emergency.

As a result, the town only had a town emergency order in place requiring masks on commercial sidewalks. To be frank, the enforcement of such a local order could have become confrontational and not well received in state courts.

After a long discussion, and yes debate, the board unanimously voted to change the signs to the current language of suggesting and encouraging the wearing of masks in crowded street areas. The state requirement to wear masks inside businesses remains in effect, and there is a clear procedure for enforcement of that order.

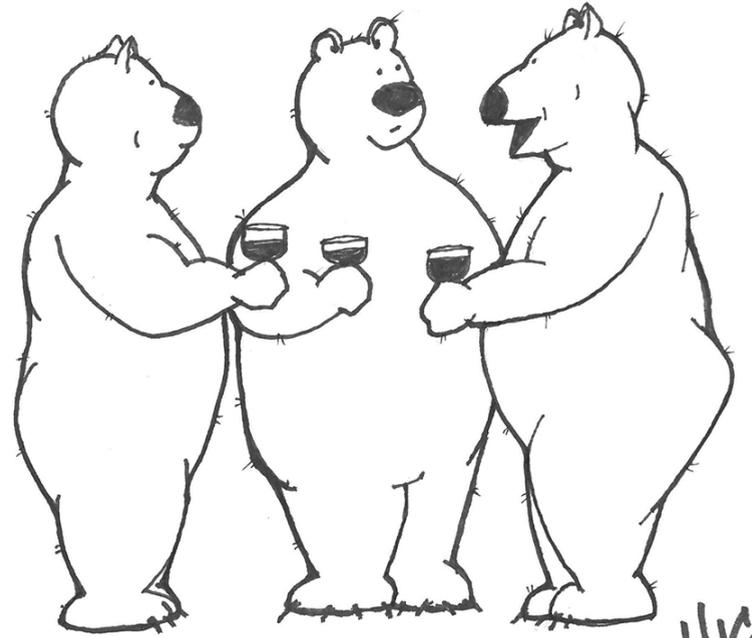
Given where the country is in regard to wearing masks, I believe the board made the best decision for the current circumstance. We now have a huge number of visitors from towns and states where the outdoor mask requirements have already been rescinded. The board came to the conclusion that the risk of outdoor exposure to COVID versus the potential for confrontation and total noncompliance was not compatible.

The several commissioners noted that many of our residents and visitors have been fully vaccinated, and their risk to being exposed to COVID, especially outdoors, is very minimal. The question was posed as to why should these folks be expected to wear a mask outdoors? Also, for enforcement purposes, how would a distinction be made between unvaccinated and vaccinated people?

I know that some may think the board's decision was not the right one. My feeling is that if someone is concerned about contracting COVID on our sidewalks, by all means, whether vaccinated or not, wear a mask. If one is not vaccinated, I believe that person should do the right thing and wear a mask.

Finally, if everyone were to get a vac-
• See MAYOR page 11

• HIC'S VIEW •



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"As you guys know, trash diving is rough now. But I know a guy, who knows a guy who is selling old pizza out the back door."

• WEATHER •

Thu, 13-May	Fri, 14-May	Sat, 15-May	Sun, 16-May
 53°F 38°F	 59°F 40°F	 61°F 44°F	 62°F 47°F
Partly sunny and cool	Partly sunny and cool	Clouds and sun	Mainly cloudy
RealFeel® High: 62° Low: 44°	RealFeel® High: 68° Low: 47°	RealFeel® High: 67° Low: 52°	RealFeel® High: 66° Low: 52°

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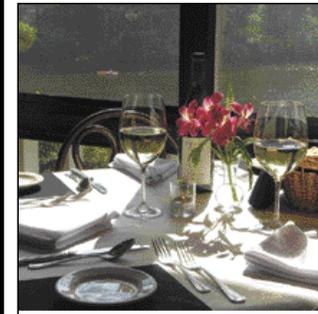


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• HIGHLANDS AREA EVENTS •

Ongoing

• The Bookworm at 555 Main Street is now open Thursday-Saturday 11a to 3p. For more information, call 828-526-3031.

• Mountain Findings Thrift Store at 432 Spruce Street is open Friday and Saturday from 10a to 1p.

• Highlands/Cashiers Alcoholics Anonymous "Open Meetings" are for anyone who thinks they may have a drinking problem or for anyone interested in the A.A. recovery program. In person meetings have resumed and are held at 12 Noon Wednesday And Friday at 1st Presbyterian Church Library, 471 Main St., Highlands. On line meeting information can be found @ www.aawnc80.org or to speak with a member of A.A. call (828) 349-4357.

Every Saturday

• Highlands Marketplace in K-H Park on Pine Street. 8a to 12:30p.

Tues., May 18

• Highlands School Grades K, 1, 2 Award Assembly in the new gym at 9 a.m.

• Highlands School Grades 3, 4, 5 Awards Assembly. New gym at 10 a.m.

Wed. May 19

• Highlands School Middle School Academic Awards in the MS courtyard or old gym at 10 a.m.

• Highlands School Middle School graduation at 5 p.m. courtyard or old gym.

Thurs., May 20

• Highlands Biological Foundation Virtual Lecture Series: Climate Conversation at 6 p.m. "On the edge of a shifting range: Climate change and birds of the southern Appalachian Mountains" with Dr. Richard Chandler, Associate Professor, University of Georgia. For more information on our Climate Conversations lecture series or to register for one of the webinars, please visit our website at www.highlandsbiological.org or call us at (828)526-2623.

Fri. & Sat., May 21-Oct. 31

• Chamber event: Outdoor music 6 to 8:30 p.m.

Fri., May 21

• Friday Night Live in Town Square: 6-8:30p. Silly Ridge Roundup

Sat., May 22

• Highlands School graduation at 10a on the track or in the new gym. TBA.

• Chamber event: Meander in May.

• Saturdays on Pine: 6-8:30p. The Caribbean Cowboys

Tues., May 25

• At 5 PM the Hemlock Restoration Initiative (HRI) will present virtually via Zoom "Hope for Hemlocks" as part of the 2021 Village Nature Series program. The presentation will include information about what everyday folks can do to get involved in hemlock conservation. The Village Nature Series is co-hosted by Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust and The Village Green and is free to attend, everyone is welcome! To receive your Zoom link for this event, please email director@cashiersgreen.com. To learn about the Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust and their mission to save valuable natural resources for all generations visit www.hicasht.org and to learn about The Village Green and their 13.2 acre sanctuary in the heart of Cashiers. www.villagegreencashiersnc.com.

Thurs. May 27

• Highlands Biological Foundation Virtual Lecture Series: Climate Conversation at 6 p.m. "Salamanders of the Future: How climate change will impact salamanders of the southern Appalachians" with Dr. Meaghan Gade, The Ohio State University. For more information on our Climate Conversations lecture series. To register go to www.highlandsbiological.org or call us at (828)526-2623.

• Laura Walsh: Orchard Sessions at The Farm 6-9p.m. Get ready for more enchanting evenings at The Farm this season with the return of our live concert series, Orchard Sessions. Settle into comfortable seating and relax into a summer evening under the heirloom apple trees. A stellar lineup of our favorite musicians will fill the magical mountain air in the stunning surroundings of the orchard, while you enjoy light bites and a cash bar. On May 27, the sessions kick off with Arizona native turned Nashville recording artist, Laura Walsh. Laura has an upbeat pop and country style that

is sure to please. Old Edwards Hotel Guests & Members \$15. General Admission \$25 (bookable two weeks prior to the event). Cash Bar & Complimentary Light Bites will be served. \$15 - \$25. Tickets: <https://www.simplenetix.com/laura-walsh-orchard-sessions-at-the-farm-tickets-68518>

Fri., May 28

• Friday Night Live Concert. 6-8:30p. Trudition

Sat. May 29

• Highlands Mountain Garden Club plant sale 9a to noon at the ballfield on the Cashiers Road.

• Saturdays on Pine: 6-8:30p. Ashley Heath & Her Heathers

Tues., June 1

• At CLE, Border Security: Issues, Strategies and Possible Solutions. Time: 2-4 Cost: \$25/\$35 Presenter: Gil Kerlikowski Former Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Register at www.clehighlands.com or call 526-8811.

Wed., June 2

• At CLE, Drug Enforcement in the U.S.: Problems and Solutions. Time: 10-12 Cost: \$25/\$35 Presenter: Gil Kerlikowski Former Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Register at www.clehighlands.com or call 526-8811.

Thurs., June 3

• At CLE, Gardening for Beauty and Nature: Ecological Landscape Design and the New American Garden (FULL) Time: 10-12 Cost \$35/\$45 Presenters: Florence Holmes and Canty Worley. Register at www.clehighlands.com or call 526-8811.

• Highlands Biological Foundation Virtual Lecture Series: Climate Conversation at 6 p.m. "Climate change and the future forests of Great Smoky Mountain National Park" with Dr. Jason Fridley, Professor. To register, go to www.highlandsbiological.org or call us at (828)526-2623.

Fri., June 4

• Friday Night Live: 6-8:30p. Byrds & Crow

Sat., June 5

• Saturdays on Pine. 6-8:30p. Peggy Ratusz

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Music and Mountains

"He climbed cathedral mountains; he saw silver clouds below; he saw everything. As far as he could see"

(John Denver).

Just a few observations for you today about Real Estate and the recently completed Bear Shadow Music Festival.

This Real Estate column is well-written each week by experts in the business. I'm honored to be in their presence to try and provide value, advice, and a service to those seeking to buy or sell property in Highlands and Cashiers.

If you're trying to decide about that right now, there are 288 Brokers up here to help you. All of us have been trained and educated to practice brokerage in your best interests, not ours. We strive to explain, execute, and simplify the "nuts & bolts" of each negotiation and ensuing purchase or sale with excellence.

During 2020, there were 3,834 total transactions involving Buyers & Sellers and so far in 2021, there have been 1,144... that's nearly 5,000 transactions in less than 18 months...whew! The point here is that we can sell your property right now, and (with some patience) we'll find you the



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perfect place in the mountains.

But the real star up here are the mountains themselves and the music it provides, both literally and figuratively.

It was never more evident than during the Bear Shadow Music Festival. Bear Shadow had everything you should consider as you think about a move to Highlands and Cashiers.

The Winfield Farms setting reminded me of festivals in Big Sky Montana or Red Rocks in Colorado, only better. The crowd was amazing and diverse. Boomers, Gen X, Millennial's, and Gen Z all gathered to sing and dance. I saw craft beer, martinis, Red Bull, and pinot noir at the same table. The weather; was the weather; to-

tally unpredictable. Guests wore sweaters and their latest Patagonia Puff Jackets as they arrived, but by sundown switched to ski parkas, stocking caps, and down gloves as temps dropped into the low 40s. Thunder, lightning, and four inches of rain wiped out Saturday. But the music was the champion, and the family was the honoree.

Drew Holcomb & Neighbors performed on Friday night. Their song "Family" summed it up this way: "Family...all in this together; Family...taking a chance; Family...like birds of a feather; Family...take off your shoes and dance."

I volunteered at the entry/exit gate each night during Bear Shadow. As people left the venue every night the echo in their comments were these "this was the greatest concert event I've ever attended; how soon can I come back?"

Mountains, music, family. That's what you're buying or selling in the Highlands-Cashiers Real Estate market. Any one of 288 Brokers will gladly find you a place to call home here on the plateau, but only one person ultimately makes the call. C'mon Up!

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...BUDGET continued from page 1

Utility rates – water, sewer, electric and sanitation – are all the same as last year.

At Thursday's meeting, commissioners agreed to continue the 3% COLA (cost of living adjustment) allocation for employees. Since the fiscal state of the town was unsure this time last year, COLA wasn't in the FY '20-'21 budget.

However, in January 2021, when it was evident that money matters were great, commissioners agreed to give employee a 3% COLA raise through the rest of the fiscal year, which ends June 30. COLA will now be included in the FY '21-'22 budget as well.

The health insurance provider for town employees will change.

Instead of signing on with Med-Cost whose cost to the town was set to increase, commissioners agreed to switch to Blue Cross Blue Shield NC this year for a \$37,982 savings compared to what MedCost was going to charge. Benefits, deductibles, etc., are expected to be about the same for employees.

The state mandated employee retirement contribution will cost the town \$12,176.86 this year which is an 11.35% increase over last year. The LEO separation allowance is up 12.04% so will cost

\$5,428.13.

The only item added to the Capital Project list from the last budget meeting is Ballfield Light Replacement at \$137,500.

Total expenditures for capital projects stands at \$3.5 million, which is closer to what was proposed for FY '20-'21 prior to COVID. But due to COVID uncertainties only \$1.6 million of last year's proposed capital projects list of \$3.2 million was budgeted.

The current General Fund Balance is \$3.8 million. The current General Fund Reserve – is \$4.9 million and the current Electric Fund Reserve is \$5.3 million.

The \$1.5 million borrowed from the General Fund Reserve for the Fire Dept. will now be put back in to the fund from fire tax collections.

Town Manager Josh Ward said the town is in good shape.

"Expenditures vs. revenues are very solid," he said. "Sales tax revenues are good, property tax collections are good as is the utility collection rate."

Meanwhile, Town Engineer Lamar Nix said should infrastructure stimulus money come Highlands' way, the town is ready with the required plans and paperwork.

– Kim Lewicki

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...SHORTAGE continued from page 1

ness network systems that day. As a result, the firm said, "We proactively took certain systems offline to contain the threat."

Colonial Pipeline's, 5,500 miles of pipelines, which run from New Jersey to Texas, carries about half of the gasoline, diesel and other fuels used on the East Coast.

Its pipelines carry fuel from refineries on the Gulf Coast to customers in the southern and eastern United States. It transports 45 percent of the fuel consumed on the East Coast – 2.5 million barrels a day -- reaching 50 million Americans.

Ransomware attacks in which hackers lock up computer systems by encrypting data usually include a demand for payment to free up the system. This has become a global scourge.

According to a report on the BBC, Darkside representatives said they didn't mean to cause problems for society.

"Our goal is to make money not creating problems for society," DarkSide wrote on its website.

In recent years, ransom attacks have affected everyone from banks and hospitals to universities and municipalities — almost 2,400

organizations in the United States were victimized last year alone, one security firm reported. But the attackers are increasingly targeting industrial sectors because these firms are more willing to pay up to regain control of their systems, experts say.

Due to this, locally there are fuel shortages in Highlands, Cashiers, Franklin and Clayton, GA.

The Bountyland fuel distributor group which services the Exxon and Mobil stations on the corner of Main and NC/106 and 1st Street in Highlands is sending fuel to its stations intermittently.

"Bountyland is trying to make sure their stations have some fuel, but I have to limit it to \$20 per vehicle," said Lenny Metrick, manager of both stations. "But I expected a shipment Tuesday night and it didn't come in."

Stations in Clayton, Franklin and Cashiers have all run out of gas – and they are all in a "wait and see" mode.

Mid-day Tuesday, the Shell station manager in Cashiers, Nicholas Bolton said he was out of gas.

"I had to shut down my pumps a few minutes ago," he said. "We have to keep 100 gallons of fuel in tanks in the ground – which may sound like a lot, but it really isn't – to keep impurities from causing problems with pumps."

For the previous 36 hours Bolton said vehicles were backed up on US 64 east in Cashiers.

Like other stations in the area, Bolton hopes for a delivery each day but doesn't know if it will happen or how much it will be.

"We are just doing the best we

can," he said.

At the BP Station at the crossroads in Cashiers, manager Heather Shields echoed both Metrick and Bolton.

As of mid-day Tuesday, she said she had 6,000 gallons left but didn't know how long that would last.

"I am allocating \$20 per vehicle, too," she said. "I am expecting a delivery on Thursday but I don't know how much it will be so I may have to decrease the allocation."

Mid-day Tuesday, Todd Taylor, manager of the 4th Street Market/Shell station in Highlands was directing traffic while alerting people to the \$30/cash limit per vehicle.

"What I have now will be gone by the end of the day and I'm not expecting another delivery until Monday [May 17]," he said.

Late Tuesday afternoon, the MC Sheriff office and the Highlands Police Dept. were called in to help direct traffic and help deal with heated tempers.

On Monday, May 11, Colonial Pipeline said segments of the shuttered pipeline are being brought back online but its four main lines remain offline.

A number of factors could impact its ability to restore a significant portion by the end of the week with safety and compliance driving operational decisions.

Metrick said even when the pipeline comes fully back on, it will likely be weeks before the pipeline is running as it was prior to the ransomware attack.

– Kim Lewicki

• BIZ/ORG NEWS •



The Highlands Chamber of Commerce held a ribbon cutting for Jeanie Edwards Fine Art, opens 223 South 4th Street. Jeanie Edwards Fine Art promotes and showcases the work of several artists from on the Plateau as well as the region.

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The Dry Sink Main St. Highlands, NC

...MASK continued from page 1

arship committee. Every year the town disperses funds from the scholarship fund to graduating seniors and students in continuing education.

Coward said the same amount was dispersed this year as last ... a total of \$45,000.

As is the norm, Highlands School Valedictorian and Salutatorian got the highest awards, \$3,000 and \$2,500, respectively. The rest of the seniors who applied received scholarships ranging from \$1,750 to \$750, based on grade-point average. The higher the grade point average the more the student got.

The second issue, this one discussed a length, was whether to rescind or continue the mask mandate.

Since NC Governor Roy Cooper recently relaxed his order to wear masks outside, Mayor Pat Taylor suggested the town revisit the issue.

"He recently rescinded his emergency

order, which we were following and were building on," said the mayor. "There may not be a need for an across-the-board mask mandate outdoors now."

Last week, Governor Cooper rescinded the mask mandate outdoors unless people are in crowded areas and can't social-distance.

The problem is two-fold.

People are coming to Highlands from neighboring states where the outside mask mandate has long been lifted and if Highlands doesn't follow the governor's lead, people traveling to Highlands even from other areas in North Carolina won't know what's allowed. In Macon County outdoor masks stopped being required a while back.

"A lot of people are coming from states where mask requirement outside is completely gone," said Police Chief Andrea Holland. "So, I thought we should discuss

• See MASK page 11



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Confusion, Scandal, and the Papacy

Father Jason Barone
Our Lady of the Mountains Catholic
Church

Generally, priests do not write about technical or esoteric Catholic theology for secular media; however, given the high visibility of the modern papacy and mass communication, not infrequently is the pope the subject of conversation in the public square. The papacy, and Pope Francis in particular, has elicited much media coverage, questions, and even confusion, from Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

This article does not intend to address any particular statement or action by the current pope; rather, it seeks to provide an answer to the question: "How do we understand a confusing or even scandalous papacy?"

Catholics understand the pope is the successor of Saint Peter, Francis being the 265th. Peter's role in the New Testament is essentially the popes'. We should therefore consider Christ's commission of Peter and how He addresses the latter's weaknesses.

Interestingly, no less than three Gospels on three different occasions does Christ commission Peter in his role as chief shepherd, while simultaneously highlighting Peter's weakness and sinfulness.

In the Gospel of Luke, Our Lord tells St. Peter "Satan has demanded to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you [Peter] that your faith may not fail; and when you will have converted, strengthen the brothers" (Luke 22:32). Here Christ charges Peter to strengthen the faith of the other Apostles, but only after he himself has converted – a conversion that presumes, of course, a fall.

The end of John's Gospel likewise gives us a beautiful account of Peter's commissioning. Three times the Lord asks Peter "Do you love me more than these?" next to a charcoal fire (see Jn 21:15). After each of Peter's positive responses, Jesus then tells him to feed and tend his flock. The three-fold commission reversed the three-fold denial (that, too, took place by a charcoal fire).

Lastly, Matthew's Gospel utilizes the strongest language, both for Peter's authority and his weakness. The Lord says to him "You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church" (Mt 16:18). The very next paragraph, the Lord calls Peter "Satan" and says, "You are a stumbling block to me." Peter is both the rock on which the Church is built, but also a stumbling block. The similar language between "rock" and "stumbling block" is striking. Further, in Greek "stumbling block" is scandalon, whence we have the word "scandal."

Peter does remain sometimes a source of scandal. Saint Paul even rebukes him harshly in Galatians 2 for acting duplicitously in the presence of different factions in the Church. Nonetheless, Peter is the clear leader in Acts of the Apostles.

Was the Lord wrong in choosing such a weak man to shepherd his flock? Could He not find anyone better abled? The Lord seems to have chosen Peter precisely for his weakness to assure the Church in all ages that despite the frailties of its leaders, the Lord Himself continues to shepherd His flock.

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• POLICE & FIRE REPORTS •

Highlands Police entries from April 28. Only the names of persons arrested, issued a Class-3 misdemeanor or public officials have been used.

April 28

- At 8:30 a.m., officers responded to a 2-vehicle accident on S. 5th Street.
- At 11:20 a.m., officers responded to a 2-vehicle accident on US 64.

May 4

- At 11:19 a.m., officers responded to a 2-vehicle accident on NC 106.

The Highlands Fire & Rescue log from May 4.

May 4

- At 11:12 a.m., the dept. responded to a call about smoke in the vicinity of Ridge Trail.
- At 11:47 a.m., the dept. was first-responders to a location on N. 4th Street.
- At 1:07 p.m., the dept. responded to a fire alarm at a residence on Horse Cove Road.
- At 1:55 p.m., the dept. provided public assistance at a location on Main Street.
- At 3:47 p.m., the dept. responded to

a fire alarm at a residence on Buck Creek Road.

- At 5:47 p.m., the dept. provided public assistance a Half Mile Farm Inn where a person was stuck in an elevator.

May 5

- At 10:32 a.m., the dept. was first-responders to at location on N. 4th Street.
- At 10:54 a.m., the dept. responded to a fire alarm at a residence on Old Edwards Lane.

May 6

- At 7:22 a.m., the dept. responded to a fires alarm at a residence on Clubhouse Trail.
- At 6:46 p.m., the dept. responded to a call of an electrical problem at a residence on Broadview Circle.

May 7

- At 2:26 p.m., the dept. responded to a fire alarm at a location on Oak Street.
- At 6:06 p.m., the dept. responded to a fire alarm at a residence on Club Circle.

May 8

- At 2:53 a.m., the dept. responded to a fire alarm at a residence on Bonnevista Road.

...MAYOR continued from page 2

nation as soon as possible, we would not be discussing this issue as we move into the summer and fall seasons. I am vaccinated, but I will continue to model responsible behavior by wearing a mask on commercial sidewalks and in businesses.

Around June 1 Governor Cooper will make another decision about masks. The town will follow his lead.

...MASK continued from page 9

it. I think at some point, the government has to quit trying to control what the people are doing," she said.

Town Manager Josh Ward said up until last week, the town has had very good mask compliance but then the police saw it starting to fall off.

While on foot patrol last week, Chief Holland said she noticed more people on the streets without masks than with masks for the first time since COVID restrictions were mandated in Highlands.

"We are getting a lot of pushback now because people are done. They don't mind wearing them inside the stores, but it's hard to control it on Main Street. We would have to get the whole department out there just to control masks," she said. "My suggestion is to let it open up and let people be responsible for their own health."

Mayor Taylor said, and Commissioner John Dotson agreed that Highlands has been very successful in making masks a requirement. "But we are in a transition period," he said.

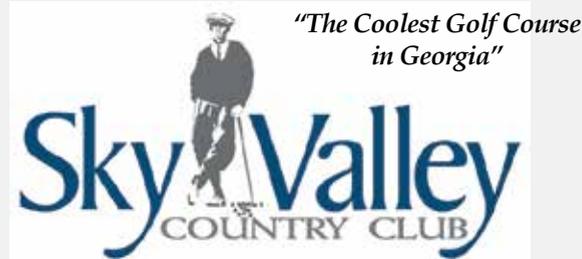
"We were dead on the money when we came down hard and heavy early on,

it served our purposes well," said Dotson. "But now I think we should take the fall-back position of the state. Since the governor says you don't have to wear a mask outside, then do that here. It makes it easier for people who are coming and going through the state of North Carolina and they don't have to make specific decisions about when visiting certain places."

The discussion ran the gamut with commissioners thinking out loud while considering what to do.

"People can make their own decisions, but somebody's decision can negatively impact someone else," said Commissioner Brian Stiehler. "But then again, I think we are in the point in the country that if you wanted a vaccine, you could have had one. If you don't have a vaccine because you think you don't need it for whatever reason or if you got the vaccine and you trust that you are protected, why are we worried about protecting people that don't want to get the vaccine? I don't want to spend resources having the police telling people to put on a mask, but at the same time, I don't

•See MASK page 13



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...MASK continued from page 11

think we should do away with it either."

Early in the discussion, Commissioner Donnie Callo-way said to make it easy. "Just say 'masks are recommend-ed in crowded areas.'"

"I think we should err on the side of caution. We don't know enough about these variants coming up, we really don't know. So, I think we should recommend wear-ing a mask and then we don't have to enforce it," he said. "If someone isn't wearing a mask, the police don't have to bust their chops."

What is the definition of a crowded area, was the next question.

Commissioner Amy Patterson said Highlands' side-walks are "crowded areas," but Chief Holland said there are some days when the sidewalks aren't crowded.

"Masks are still required in public places, but there are some days when the sidewalks aren't crowded so people can socially distance on the sidewalks, but then there are days they can't so those of us who want to wear a mask, who want to keep ourselves safe from those who are not, then let us choose to wear a mask instead of telling some-one they have to," she said.

Commissioner Patterson said a person's behavior im-pacts other people's behavior and that's why there are rules concerning certain things – "anything that impacts other people's health," she said.

"We are talking about not enforcing something that we think is better for us. I don't fall back on anyone else's opinion. I make my own opinion. So don't say, because the governor says this, we should do this; figure out what our specific local environment needs. The governor doesn't live in Highlands. The governor has to do what's best for the majority of his state. We have to do what's best for a small subset of that. We need to do what is best for the healthcare of our citizens," she said.

Mayor Taylor reminded commissioners that Gov-ernor Cooper said municipalities and counties could be more stringent than he.

Commissioner Dotson held his position.

"But now, instead of being more restrictive than the state, we need to fall back and parallel what the state says. We were more stringent than the state was, and we did what needed to be done at the time. But now, if outside, you don't have to wear a mask but if inside you do," he said.

Eventually, a consensus was reached.

"In the beginning, we didn't know anything, and we didn't have a vaccine, so masks were our best option. We needed everyone to do it because there was no other way to protect ourselves. To protect everyone, we had to make masks mandatory," said Commissioner Patterson. "Now we have other options to protect ourselves which are the vaccines. So, if you are scared of variants just wear a mask. The virus isn't over. We haven't won the war. But we have options. Now because you can opt to get the vaccine, we don't need to make people wearing the mask mandatory outside."

The signs on the Highlands' streets in the commercial district now read: "Masks Suggested in Crowded Areas."

– Kim Lewicki

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