

# COASTAL OBSERVER

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50 cents



Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

The beach patrol passes a couple of shaggers at North Litchfield over the weekend. The beaches were crowded, but most people maintained social distancing, the patrol found. Below, a group was asked to spread out.

CORONAVIRUS | Bans take effect along coast

## State draws line in the sand

BY CHARLES SWENSON  
COASTAL OBSERVER

Public access to the beaches is closed and short-term rentals on the Waccamaw Neck are banned until the end of the month. But that doesn't mean the beaches are closed or the beach houses are empty.

Second-home owners and their friends are filling the houses. They are still able to use the beach, as are people with private access through gated communities.

Gov. Henry McMaster this week ordered the closing of accesses to the beaches and public waterways after a weekend of 80-degree weather that drew summertime crowds. It also drew complaints that people were not adhering to social-distancing rules to help stop the spread of the coronavirus.

The access ban has also drawn complaints. "I think it's seriously flawed," state Sen Stephen Goldfinch said. "You've literally relegated us to the house."

He spoke with McMaster and



hoped guidelines on enforcement would ease the restrictions. "They've done nothing about it," Goldfinch said. "You can count on it being around a couple of weeks."

The Georgetown County Sheriff's Office had three pairs of deputies on beach patrol over the weekend. Pawleys Island Police had extra officers on duty. No major gatherings were reported.

"It looks like a lot, but when

you get up close, they're all spread out," Lt. Mike Nelson of the sheriff's office said of the beachgoers at Litchfield.

A man approached the beach patrol in front of Litchfield by the Sea on Saturday afternoon. "I don't want to rat anybody out, but there's a group of 15 or 20," he said, pointing toward North Litchfield. "I don't want them to ruin it for everybody and they close the beach."

Sgt. Chuck Weaver and Deputy Ryan Matthews headed up the beach in their ATV. The group of teens numbered around 10.

"Can you guys spread out a little?" Weaver asked. They did.

Aside from families, it was the first group that the deputies had found that exceeded the three-person threshold for public gatherings invoked by McMaster to help halt the spread of the coronavirus.

Weaver, who heads the beach patrol, said he understood the desire to get to the beach after two weeks of school closings, restaurant closings and the closing of sports and entertainment venues. "When you've done all the yard work, where are you going to go?" he asked.

Calls came in all day about crowds. One reported a large gathering near the Litchfield Inn, where Weaver and Matthew had just passed and noted that the crowd seemed to be thinning out.

Another call came from Garden City. A woman reported a golf cart parked on the street in

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CAPITAL SALES TAX

## Project list starts out above budget

BY CHARLES SWENSON  
COASTAL OBSERVER

Members of a county sales tax commission are reviewing the details of 81 capital projects worth over \$238 million for a November referendum that is expected to contain about \$90 million in projects to be completed over eight years.

And the five-member commission will solicit additional projects through April 24.

The three highest-priced projects on the list alone would exceed the estimated revenue: a new county jail at \$40 million; local road paving projects on the state Department of Transportation's master list at \$29.9 million; and a dredging and reconfiguration of Georgetown's inner harbor at \$26.3 million.

Georgetown County Council agreed to put new one-cent tax before the voters as a way to fund all its capital projects, freeing up other funds for operations.

Voters approved a capital projects sales tax in 2014 to fund \$28.2 million in projects over four years. It

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MENTAL HEALTH

## Counselors stay busy in time of anxiety

BY CHRIS SOKOLOSKI  
COASTAL OBSERVER

The uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic has people on edge and is causing a lot of stress and anxiety.

"Life has definitely changed, that's for sure," said Skylar Hepler, a Pawleys Island-based counselor. "My hope is that people don't let the importance of mental health fall to the bottom of their priority list."

"Without health there is no mental health," said Kelly Troyer, the outreach coordinator for the National Alliance on Mental Illness in the Charleston area. "But mental health is invisible most of the time. It's not really regarded the same way in society as someone with a physical [ailment]."

Hepler and Troyer are continuing to work with patients during the COVID-19 crisis, although social distancing means work is done by phone and video chats.

"We're grassroots and we're on the ground, but we can't be on the ground in the same way," Troyer said. "It's definitely posing a problem with people who need mental health services."

Hepler said some people are not comfortable with video chats. Some don't have internet access or don't have a private space at home where they can talk to a counselor.

"I think it's super helpful to be able to see one another, but it's more important to be a little uncomfortable than to just cut it off completely," she added.

Troyer is also using video chats for individuals and to keep

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SAFETY | Murrells Inlet-Garden City FD

## Long-time assistant takes over from veteran fire chief

BY CHRIS SOKOLOSKI  
COASTAL OBSERVER

J.R. Haney is now in charge of the fire department he joined 17 years ago as a paramedic. He was named last week to replace Norman Knight as chief of the Murrells Inlet-Garden City Fire Department.

"This department has always been a big part of my life," Haney said.

He was 22 when he was hired. He's now 40.

"I got married in 2005 and rode off in one of the buckets on the ladder truck," he said. "I've been to more funerals than I want, but probably been to more weddings than those. It's been quite a ride."

Knight retired in January after 40 years as a firefighter, including 19 as the department's chief.

"Chief Knight has been my chief for nearly half my life," Haney said. "Having his mentorship since I've been his assistant chief since 2012 ... I think I had a benefit that a lot of others didn't."

Haney has done almost every job in the department including firefighter/paramedic, engineer/paramedic, EMS captain and assistant fire chief.

"I can tell you the tread depth of every one of our tires, how many rolls of toilet paper we have here [and] the names of all of our firefighters' kids," Haney said. "The crews that have worked with me ... they know what to expect and know what I'm looking

for and we have that relationship. I think that's going to help keep moving us along."

A desire to help people is what attracted Haney to the job.

"I gravitated to the paramedic side because of the ability to instantly see the difference that you're making in somebody's life," Haney said. "When they're in the back of that ambulance and they can't breathe or they're having a heart issue, I can do something immediately to ease that pain."

It's a good feeling, and he added, "It's kind of addictive and you want to continue helping more people."

The Murrells Inlet-Garden City Fire Department is state special-purpose district that runs north from Brookgreen Gardens

Chief J.R. Haney started with the department as a paramedic.

Chris Sokoloski/Coastal Observer

across the Georgetown-Horry county line to Surfside Beach and from the Waccamaw River to the Atlantic Ocean.

When Haney was hired as a part-time paramedic, the department had just started its EMS service. "We've watched it just grow 200-fold," Haney said. "It's unbelievable."

Haney sees the biggest challenge for the department going forward will be keeping up with the rising demand for services and recruiting new firefighters and paramedics.

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