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The Desert Sun

TUESDAY, AUGUST 10, 2021 | DESERTSUN.COM

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‘Do what you can while you can’

Pandemic can’t break stride of racewalker, 75



Racewalker Darlene Backlund cools down after a workout outside her home in Palm Springs on July 29. Backlund won a Gold medal in the 75-79 age group’s 10 km Racewalk at the USA Track & Field National Masters Championships last month. PHOTOS BY TAYA GRAY/THE DESERT SUN

Darlene Backlund, a racewalking world-record holder and advocate for the sport, hasn’t let the COVID-19 pandemic slow her down — literally. She’s continued to train, racewalking an average of five miles every day, and just added three more racewalking medals to her trophy wall. • The 75-year-old credits racewalking — a track and field sport that looks a little like power walking — for her good health. And, though she loves to win, that isn’t her goal anymore.

Now she’s content cheering on friends, including Robyn Stevens and Nick Christie, the only two American racewalkers who competed in this year’s Olympics. (Yes, it is indeed an Olympic sport!)

Both the men’s and women’s 20 km (a little more than 12 miles) races aired on the West Coast in the middle of the night on Thursday and Friday, but those tuning in could see dozens of “elite walkers” from around the world compete in close to 90-degree weather, booties bouncing as they sped through Sapporo Odori Park in Japan.

Christie came in 50th in the 20 km race with a time of 1:34:37 — the gold medalist, Massimo Stano from Italy, finished in 1:21:05. That’s a pace of about 9 miles per hour — faster than most people run. Stevens finished 33rd in the women’s

See **BACKLUND**, Page 8A



Booming
Maria Sestito
Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK



CORONAVIRUS BY THE NUMBERS

Riverside County’s cases are surging

5,600 new cases in August; 79 hospitalized in Coachella Valley

Emma Sasic and Mike Stucka
Palm Springs Desert Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK

Riverside County, alongside Los Angeles and Orange counties, is seeing the steepest rise in COVID-19 cases week over week, an analysis of new data shows.

In the week ending Sunday, Riverside saw its weekly total go from 3,351 cases to 5,385 cases — a jump of 60.7%. Deaths held steady, at five each week.

The county’s case rate is 25.2 per 100,000, and the positivity rate is 11.5%. If California was still operating under its color-coded, tiered reopening system, Riverside County would fall under the purple, most restrictive tier based on its case rate and positivity rate.

Riverside County has a “high” community transmission rate, which is defined as having more than 100 total new cases per 100,000 people in the past seven days, according to the Centers for Disease Con-

See **SURGE**, Page 2A

New Chamber CEO sees opportunity in clean energy sector

James B. Cutchin
Palm Springs Desert Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK

Emily Falappino took the helm at the Greater Coachella Valley Chamber of Commerce last month, becoming the organization’s second leader since its formation five years ago. She has big shoes to fill, following former President and CEO Joshua Bonner, who assembled the GCVCC out of the Indio, Coachella and La Quinta Chambers of Commerce to create the area’s only regional chamber.

While Bonner created the “infrastructure” for the 1,317-member organization, Falappino says she plans to bring a new focus on big-picture economic development to the chamber. This includes ambitious plans to grow the region’s entrepreneurship ecosystem and support the growth of industries such as clean energy, with the lofty vision of helping turn the Coachella Valley into “the future Silicon Valley of the clean energy sector.”

See **FALAPPINO**, Page 6A

MORE INSIDE 1B



BNP Paribas Open extends men’s tourney to 2 weeks

The Indian Wells Tennis Garden will host the BNP Paribas Open Oct. 4-17 and the men’s field has grown to 96. JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

USA TODAY

UN report on climate: ‘Code red for humanity’

Hundreds of top scientists released a report Monday on the danger that human-caused climate change poses to the world. Calling it “code red for humanity,” the landmark report was released in Geneva by the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. **Story, 15A**

Ex-LAPD is cop charged with killing disabled man

A former Los Angeles Police Department officer who opened fire during an altercation inside a Corona Costco store in 2019, killing a 32-year-old man and injuring his parents, was arrested Monday on charges of voluntary manslaughter and assault with a semiautomatic firearm. Salvador Sanchez was arrested in Riverside County, according to the state Attorney General’s Office, which is handling the case. Sanchez had initially avoided prosecution. **Story, 4A**

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Recruiter tasked with finding guardians of space

Samantha Gholar Weires
Sarasota Herald-Tribune
USA TODAY NETWORK

COCOA BEACH, Fla. — The U.S. created the newest branch of its Armed Forces in 2019 to prepare the nation's defense for a new age of space power.

Sgt. Kalixta Nichols is tasked with finding those new guardians of space.

A resident of Sarasota, Florida, single mother and active duty member of the U.S. Air Force, Nichols in July became the first Space Force recruiter for Central and Southwest Florida, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Nichols is part of the recruiting team at Patrick Space Force Base, one of only a handful of women on her squadron and the first recruiter for the Space Force in the Sarasota-Bradenton region. Nichols said she is enthralled with her new position and already has begun recruit-

ing for the job.

"I just see all of the potential in it," Nichols said during a late July tour of the base on Florida's Space Coast. "It's a legacy. We are building a legacy, and the way that I look at it is ... I'm helping pioneer it from the ground up."



Nichols

Nichols moved to Sarasota last summer from her appointment at Aviano Air Force Base in Italy, where she lived for nearly eight years working as an aerospace ground equipment specialist.

Nichols began her career in the Air Force at age 21 and served for 13 years. She has been on two deployments, including one that separated her from her then elementary-aged son for six months. She returned to the U.S. for a role as an Air Force recruiter last sum-

mer and spent just shy of a year recruiting airmen for enlistment around Sarasota County when she received life-changing news from the new Space Force in June.

Tucked between Satellite Beach and Cocoa Beach, Patrick Space Force Base has a population of nearly 1,600 people. The silver, rocket-shaped insignia, a symbol that is donned by a select number of officers and guardians on their uniforms, marks the entry point for the country's first operational Space Force base.

Nichols works at the base and also has an office in Sarasota. Born out of the Air Force, the Space Force was launched in December 2019 and serves the country by organizing, training and equipping forces to protect the U.S. and allied interests in space.

The Space Force develops what are dubbed guardians, the military branch's

name for enlisted personnel, and works to acquire space systems. The branch must fill 11,000 new positions in the coming years. Nichols has completed her first month of recruiting and will travel to southern California on Aug. 8 where she and other recruiters from the Space Force's six bases across the country will complete additional training.

Nichols said that the recruiting process is similar to the Air Force but requires candidates to complete a specific application, which is then given to a board committee that vets the candidates. Once selected and enlisted, recruits are guided into a role that suits their interests and supports the needs of the military.

There are 311 available Space Force jobs, such as space systems operators, computer systems programmers, cybersecurity, intelligence analyst and cyber-space operations officer.

Falappino

Continued from Page 1A

The 39-year-old Falappino split her early years between the Los Angeles area and Temecula, where she later raised her own daughter and spent the majority of her professional career.

She helped build two tourism-adjacent businesses — chartered transportation service Stryder Transportation and California wine tour company Grapeline Wine Tours — before leaving to head the Temecula Valley Chamber of Commerce in 2019.

The new GCVCC president has a bachelor's degree in global business management from the University of Phoenix and an MBA from Cal State San Bernardino.

She said that, while coming over to "the other side of the hill" to the Coachella Valley was — at first — "a strange thing to consider," the area's potential for economic development inspired her to leave behind her longtime home for the desert.

The Desert Sun spoke with Falappino about her plans for the GCVCC, the pandemic's long-term impact on local businesses and her vision for the Coachella Valley's economic future.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

Q: What made you want to leave Temecula and head the Coachella Valley's regional chamber?

Once I came to learn of the opportunity (to lead the GCVCC), I started driving out on the weekends. I literally would drive from one end of the valley to the other and get lost in different neighborhoods and drive through what appeared to be different business districts. I fell in love with everything that I saw. Even as I've been here a few weeks now, I'm constantly asking city managers' offices and different industry stakeholders, "Do you see what I see?" Because I see nothing but potential economic development for decades to come.

Is there anything you plan to do differently than your predecessor?

Josh, as a leader, he was a visionary and a bold risk-taker. He was in the right position at the right time to create this regional coalition. This valley needed that and still very much needs it today.

I have those same attributes. I'm bold. I'm not afraid to do big things. I'm not afraid to ask questions and to take

risks. But I think the organization needs to do less of that right now and to do more investment in broadening our reach.

What do you mean by 'broadening our reach'?

I would like to see us spend more time focusing on what we should be doing economically as a region, what industries we should be developing and what the future trajectory is for the entire valley. We should then closely examine each community's uniqueness and place within that vision and focus on developing the resources and fostering the connections to make sure that each community gets to develop its own strengths and its own direction while contributing to that regional development.

That's really where I see us over the next couple of years. It's almost a degree of thought-leadership. We have to be the first to cast vision for communities and to help them see themselves as unique individual entities, but also as part of a greater region. And then we need to go outside our community to bring great insights, inspirations, case studies and examples. We need to be among the first to reach out (to the federal government) for funding and help.

And then (we need to be) catalyzing everyone that we have locally to take advantage of these opportunities and work together to bring about the next economic development change.

That sounds very broad, which it is. That's big-picture thinking.

And what about the more detailed picture? Are there any specific areas you would like to focus on?

We need to be hosting some bigger annual events that aren't things like "State of the City." All of the community events we do are worthwhile investments, but we need to be hosting some thought-leadership summits. We should have an entrepreneurs summit here. I'd love to see that be a one- to two-day event where we bring in great minds from the outside who help inspire our locals who want to engage in entrepreneurialism. Then I want to have and line up the right resources with other collaborative partners to make sure that practically, people can take that inspiration and turn it into something with help and support here.

As a chamber, we sometimes get stuck in this stereotype of "Oh, they host mixers and networking functions

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Continued from previous page

and little lunch get-togethers.” All of those things are really important and yes they are part of what we do, but what I don’t see anyone doing, that I think is our proper place, is to start hosting much larger-scale events that provide inspiration and practical tools to help businesses develop.

Do you have any thoughts on how the Coachella Valley should position itself economically for the eventual end of the pandemic?

We can try and do what we’ve always done and just get back to normal. Call that right, wrong or indifferent. But I think that we have a better opportunity here to almost leapfrog into the next version of our potential. And by that I mean, there are one-of-a-kind resources to help businesses right now in terms of grants, opportunity zone funding, and even from the federal level, there are just so many funds that are being released right now to help regional economies develop. I think that we have the greatest opportunity to make what’s ahead part of our right now. If the pandemic hadn’t happened, I don’t know that we would really be looking at that opportunity in the same way. Everything has accelerated, but so have the resources.

Do you anticipate any long-term changes to the way local businesses operate as a result of the pandemic?

Our local businesses, especially on the small business side, they have learned what resilience looks like and they have learned that they can engage in business in new and different ways. I think that a savvy entrepreneur is going to look forward and say, “Just because the pandemic is over and I don’t have to do curbside anymore, doesn’t mean that I need to stop it. Is there a way that I can improve my gross receipts and increase the number of sales by now making the products available in multiple ways?”

So you think some of those lower-contact practices like online ordering will remain more common with local businesses after the pandemic than they were before?

I think digitalization and digital commerce is something that every business needs to be engaged in. There is still a long way to go for the small mom-and-pop shops who don’t necessarily have the capital infrastructure or the time to understand how digital commerce is important for them. Nearly every business could benefit from having some kind of online sale available. Every business could benefit from having different ways of delivering their product to their customer. A savvy entrepreneur is going to find ways to continue utilizing the best practices that they had to adopt during COVID and make it a permanent part of their operation.

Do you think that the rising number of COVID cases and a possible third wave of infections



Emily Falappino at the Temecula Valley Chamber of Commerce Member Appreciation Event in 2019.

TEMECULA VALLEY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

will have a significant impact on the local economy?

When the pandemic first hit, we didn’t know anything about COVID-19. We weren’t prepared, so we all scrambled and we experienced COVID-19 really harshly the first time around.

Fast-forward to the present moment, we know so much more this time around. We are empowered with intelligence at this point. I think it behooves all of us to act responsibly so we don’t become the victims of a third wave — so that we can face a third wave and stay afloat without the same damaging effects that we had before.

Obviously, the delta variant is hitting our area in a significant way. It’s noticeable. But we know how to maintain control. We know how to mitigate the spread. We know how to pivot our businesses differently. So I don’t think that a third wave is something that really needs to knock us backwards. I think we all just need to be prepared and aware and responsible in trying to minimize the effects of it.

You’ve talked about pushing broader economic development in the valley. Are there any specific sectors that you are hoping to see built out here?

Clean energy in particular is something that I think the Coachella Valley is uniquely positioned for. When I look at the state’s goals, the state of California knows that it is a global power in terms of economics. When you listen to even the current governor Newsom talk about the future of business, he is really focused on clean energy.

When you examine the state of California, where do we have the opportunity to develop that? Certainly we have big cities like Los Angeles, San Diego, Orange County, San Francisco, but frankly, those cities are already built out. They’re capped out. You’re going to have to go to a new part of the state. When you consider where we have the resources to develop, you have the Central Valley, but really the Inland Empire of-

fers every natural resource, great logistics — with all of our airports, freeways, etc. When I look within the Inland Empire, I think the Coachella Valley is probably the ripest terrain.

What in particular about the Coachella Valley makes it stand out to you?

When I think of the Coachella Valley, it’s one of the most unique places in the entire state because we have every natural resource that you could think of. We have land, we have wind, we have water. And you’ve got human capital as well. I think we’re the perfect place for new industry development.

When you look too at what’s happening out toward Thermal and the Salton Sea (with lithium mining), it’s really exciting to think that we have access to so many natural resources in our valley that can create huge businesses and huge industry development that we’ve never had here before. And that becomes a huge attraction tool. When you attract that kind of industry or one type of business, inherently it brings others alongside it.

I just see so many new industries evolving out this way and I hope that GCVCC will partner with others like CVEP (the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership) to really become a business attraction partner in bringing new industry this way and creating new jobs.

Do you have any thoughts on how the Coachella Valley can make new industries like clean energy take off here?

When my brain thinks of this stuff, I kind of reverse-engineer everything. If we’re going to have clean energy; if we’re going to have building and design; if we’re going to have STEM (science, technology and math-related fields) here in the future, what kind of work force do we need? And what kind of education does that workforce need to have?

This is where an organization like the chamber comes into play, because we get to collaborate with higher-education partners and with governmental partners to say “Hey listen, we need to have these resources here in education to prepare today’s youth to become tomorrow’s workforce.” And that takes intentional effort. We need to have the programs here, we need to have the campus here, you need to have the affordability aspect. All of those things need to be pre-planned and we have to start doing that now so that a number of years from now we have the workforce.

So it sounds like you see education and promoting things like a four-year university here as priorities for the chamber?

(Yes,) let’s make sure that we advocate for that four-year university. Let’s make sure that the higher education partners that we do have here expand their programs and that they do so with intentional thought. What is the industry that we’re going to prepare for, what classes and curriculum do we need to

have, and then how are we making sure we are engaging the youth so that they are inspired to attend school here, take these programs and then turn around and stay here and develop their careers here.

That takes a lot of intentional thought and collaboration, and that’s exactly what the chamber exists for — to make sure that those collaborations and that thought process is there and furthered until it becomes a reality.

You talk about the importance of entrepreneurship. Are there any other specific things you are planning on doing to support that?

You have to make sure that it’s easy for people to engage in business. Anyone who has lived in California or followed California politics long enough knows that doing business in the state of California can be very, very difficult. The challenges of being a business owner never end in this state.

We have to be able to moderate that and we need to be able to make it easier to do business and employ workforce in this state. We as a chamber are constantly engaged in that fight. I know our organization plans on taking at least two trips to Sacramento and (Washington) D.C. per year to basically lobby on behalf of small business and the voice of the entrepreneur.

The other thing that is a challenge for entrepreneurs is access to capital. Particularly for minority communities, that access to capital can be a real struggle. The cost of life in California has exponentially increased, and with that the cost of starting a business is up there. We need to have better programs and better access to capital. The typical banking institutions and the big banks are just not feasible for most. Maybe that’s more CDFI’s (groups that provide financial services in low-income communities), the Small Business Administration right now is just overrun with the programs it’s trying to offer. We need to have more grassroots programming to get cash into accounts that are going to be used for business.

Any final thoughts on the near-term outlook for the GCVCC?

We are privileged as an organization to have grown over the last five years into who we are today. But I’ll tell you, I’m more excited about who we’re going to be five years from now. Because I think it will be tremendously bigger, but with much more efficacy.

We are going to work tirelessly over the next couple of years to make sure that our reach is more effective and that it continues to broaden so that it impacts both our economy and the quality of life here. Those two go hand-in-hand.

We want to be engaged with anyone and everyone who has a need, a question or a request, we’re here for you.

The Greater Coachella Valley Chamber of Commerce can be reached by email at info@gcvcc.org, by phone at (760) 347-0676 or through the offices listed on gcvcc.org.

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