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## CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

## Florida's death rate distinctly small

As COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are surging, the amount of people dying is the second lowest in the country

By **Cindy Krischer Goodman, David Fleshler and David Schutz**  
South Florida Sun Sentinel

With COVID cases skyrocketing, Florida is experiencing one of the worst waves of the omicron variant in the United States.

Yet Florida's death rate over the past seven days is the second lowest in the country, after only Alaska. What's going on?

Even as record COVID cases in the U.S. were reported last week, deaths dipped slightly, and still, Florida's death rate is distinctly low, particularly in a state with a

large, vulnerable elderly population.

Experts say several factors could explain the currently low rate: Florida's horrific toll from delta and its acquired resistance and vaccination rates may be buffering the state at a time when others states are contending with two variants. Or, because of the way Florida reports COVID deaths, which already tend to lag infections and hospitalizations, the true death rate from this recent wave may be too soon to know.

## LOCAL &amp; STATE

Florida's average for daily cases has increased for 42 consecutive days. **Page 3**

Only months ago, the state's death rate was among the highest in the nation. The delta wave hit Florida hard, taking the lives of more than 22,000 people between June

**Turn to Rates, Page 2**



Patrick Murphy, 2 1/2, of Delray Beach, turns on the water for his dogs Bowie and Bean at Lake Ida Dog Park in Delray Beach.

CARLINE JEAN/SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL

## Happy and healthy

What you need to know about canine companionship in South Florida

By **Lois K. Solomon**  
South Florida Sun Sentinel

The park, the beach, the grocery store: We South Floridians bring our dogs everywhere, even when we're not supposed to.

The rules are sometimes confusing. Dogs are mostly not allowed on the beach, except in certain sections at specific hours. Some restaurants welcome leashed canines for outdoor dining; others will shoo you out as you try to enter with your pet.

Those who have moved here from other states may also notice strange tropical pet diseases and unexpected menaces in the grass (learn below about the bufo toad).

Here's what you need to know about enjoying your canines in South Florida's hot and sticky weather and how to keep them safe.

### Where can you bring your dog?

**Dog parks:** There are dog parks in almost every city in Broward and Palm Beach coun-

**Turn to Dogs, Page 33**



Pebbles, a 6-month-old American pit bull terrier, enjoys the afternoon at Kapow Noodle Bar in Boca Raton's Mizner Park last summer. **MICHAEL LAUGHLIN/SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL**

## Inflation hitting housing market

Some South Florida buyers and sellers changing course

By **Amber Randall**  
South Florida Sun Sentinel

As inflation rises across the country, some buyers and sellers in South Florida are adjusting their home process to compensate.

With the market in the region already red hot, real estate agents say they have been dealing with sellers who want to bump up their sell date, to take advantage of higher prices in case inflation slows the market while some buyers are also accelerating their buying process to take advantage of interest rates before they climb.

"Mostly for me, I am seeing a change or acceleration with my sellers," Dawn Forgi-one with Lang Realty in Boca Raton said.

One of her clients, a couple that lives in a 55-and-over community, had been planning to sell their home in a year, to move

**Turn to Housing, Page 36**

## Voters to face new round of property taxes


By **Scott Travis**  
South Florida Sun Sentinel

South Florida voters will be asked to approve a property tax this year to avoid major cuts in teacher pay and safety initiatives enacted since the Parkland tragedy.

In Broward County, this could mean an average tax increase of \$150 for the average homeowner if voters say yes in the August primary. Palm Beach County voters will be asked during the November general election to continue an existing tax. Details for Miami-Dade weren't available.

The tax would be a renewal or expansion of a property tax approved in 2018, during a time of heightened concern over school safety and teacher retention.

**Turn to Taxes, Page 36**




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## Taxes

from Page 1

School districts wanted money to put more police officers, security guards and mental health counselors in schools after a troubled former student killed 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland on Valentine's Day in 2018.

That same year, teacher discontent nationwide over pay and safety was growing, with teachers in some states going on strike.

So all three South Florida counties, as well as many other districts, asked voters to approve referendums to raise taxes. The money paid for teacher supplements and security personnel in all three counties and mental health counselors in Broward and Palm Beach counties. Palm Beach County also uses a portion of its tax to pay for art and music teacher positions.

Under state law, the money only lasts for four

years, unless voters approve the tax again in a new referendum.

"It's important for the community to know if the referendum were to go away, all these individual [allocations] would go away, teacher supplements, safety and security and mental health," said John Sullivan, legislative liaison for Broward schools.

The school district has been widely criticized for how it executed a 2014 referendum for school renovations. But Sullivan said the district has spent the 2018 money as promised.

"The community can see the impact of their investment," Sullivan said. "The security presence in schools has been greatly enhanced."

Broward voters agreed four years ago to levy \$50 on every \$1,000 worth of assessed property, but the School Board now wants to raise that to \$100. That would be an increase from \$150 to \$300 for the owner of a \$325,000 home.

If voters fail to pass the tax

increase, that same homeowner would pay \$150 less.

Broward school officials say a major reason a higher tax is needed is because of a law passed by the Legislature in 2019 that requires school districts to share referendum dollars with charter schools. About 20% of Broward students attend charter schools, and Broward would have to share \$23 million if it asked voters for the same tax as last time.

Palm Beach County is actually not affected by this law. Charter schools sued that school district to receive a share of its 2018 referendum dollars and won.

"We are looking to renew the referendum. We aren't seeking an increase," Palm Beach County Superintendent Mike Burke said. "Charter schools represent 11% of our enrollment, and we've already been forced to start sharing that money. We've been forced to work them into our budget."

He said the cuts were offset some by rising property values.

Palm Beach County's tax of \$100 per \$100,000 of assessed property is twice the \$50 that Broward levies. Miami-Dade homeowners pay \$75.

The higher tax has enabled the other districts to offer larger supplements.

Palm Beach County pays veteran teachers' supplements of up to \$10,000 and Miami-Dade \$18,500. Broward's supplements were generally \$8,000 or less with a few high-paid teachers getting more.

"We need to be competitive with our surrounding districts and compensate out teachers appropriately," School Board member Lori Alhadeff said.

The money also pays for bonuses for teacher aides, bus drivers and cafeteria workers. Several School Board members say they would like to expand that to other employees who work at schools, including custodians, clerical and

administrators, although no decisions have been made yet.

Anna Fusco, president of the Broward Teachers Union, said the money from the 2018 referendum has helped, "but it still needs to be better and more competitive."

But the bonuses have caused some friction among teachers. The union negotiated the allocations, and while some veteran teachers got supplements of \$8,000 or more, teachers hired in the last decade were given less than \$2,000.

Waldo Jude Mirambeau, a teacher at McArthur High in Hollywood, said he only receives \$71 a paycheck, while some higher-paid teachers are getting closer to \$500, which he finds disheartening.

He said he unsuccessfully tried to persuade the union and School Board to give more money to teachers with less seniority, who are struggling with the rising cost of living in South Florida.

Leaders from Broward Teachers Union, which negotiated the supplements, have argued many veteran teachers were promised raises years ago that they never got when the district eliminated guaranteed pay raises for experience.

Union leaders also say newer teachers, some who had been making less than \$44,000, were all raised to a minimum salary of \$47,500 due to a recent state law.

Still, Mirambeau said he's reluctant to approve this year's referendum.

"I'm a homeowner. I have to pay those taxes," he said. "I'm getting \$72 a paycheck, which is barely covering my union dues. I'd rather my taxes not go up."

School Board members say they hope with an increased tax, all teachers will get a significant boost to their salaries.

"If this were not to pass, it's a lot of money that's going to our teachers that would greatly impact them," School Board Chairwoman Laurie Rich Levinson said.

## Housing

from Page 1

back up north. However, now they are planning to sell immediately, concerned about how inflation will affect the real estate market.

"They see with inflation the market turning a little bit, and they don't feel that they will ever get as much as they could possibly as at this time," she said.

They are not alone. According to a survey from RedFin profiling 1,500 buyers and sellers who are planning to buy or sell a home in the next 12 months, 10% said they had moved up their home-selling plans due to inflation. Seven percent said they had delayed their home selling plans because of it.

How people interpret inflation and how it may affect them financially can vary from person to person.

"Some people may delay buying because they're worried that with prices



As inflation rises across the country, some buyers and sellers in South Florida are adjusting their process to compensate. CARLINE JEAN/SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL

rising on everything from food to fuel, now is not the right time to make a huge purchase," said Redfin

Chief Economist Daryl Fairweather. "But others might move faster to find a house because they're worried

home prices and rent prices will increase even more, and they want to lock in a fixed payment."

Inflation rose to 6.8% in November, a level not seen in almost 40 years, the survey noted.

For buyers, some have been accelerating their plans so they can take advantage of the lower mortgage interest rates while they still can, noted Bonnie Heatzig, executive director of luxury sales at Douglas Elliman in Boca Raton.

"With inflation spiking, it is anticipated that mortgage rates will rise and the money they're borrowing to buy a home will buy them less," Heatzig explained.

Other buyers are eager to move up their plans as rent prices soar and become more unaffordable, said Forgiione. One of her clients decided to jump into the housing market when her two-bedroom apartment shot up in rent from \$2,700 to \$3,500 a month.

According to the RedFin survey, 24% of homebuyers had moved up their homebuying plans due to inflation. Meanwhile, 29% had

decided to put their home buying process on pause due to inflation.

Heatzig also noted that some of her buyers are factoring in how inflation may add to the cost of a big renovation — a house that doesn't need much work is more appealing when the cost of building materials is through the roof.

Some builders are also considering the rising cost of materials when they make their contracts for new homes, said Jeffrey Lichtenstein of Echo Properties in Palm Beach Gardens.

But for others, it's not affecting their decision to buy or sell at all: 27% of respondents said it didn't influence their decision either way.

Jeff Grant with ReMAX Properties in Palm Beach Gardens said concerns about inflation haven't really come up with his buyers recently, since many of them are cash buyers looking at properties that are priced between \$800,000 to \$2 million.

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