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Thursday, June 18, 2026

County Manager Job Is Hot Ticket

By MICHAEL KELLY
Of The Herald-Advocate

Twenty-five people applied for the County Manager position to replace Terry Atchley, who announced in April he would be retiring on July 3.

The position was advertised in The Herald-Advocate and through the Florida Association of Counties and the Florida League of Cities websites to draw the largest pool of applicants.

The human resources director and the county labor attorney were responsible for receiving and reviewing all the applications and resumes before presenting the full list to the board for their consideration last week.

The candidates are Tanya Ayers, Adolfo Bailon, David Bennett, Brian Blad, Michael Brillhart, Michael Camacho, Ann Capela, Brandon Carter, Peggy Castano, George Dickens III, Anthony Dimino, Wauchula Assistant City Manager John Eason, Brian Geoghegan, Patrick Gillis, Stanley Hawthorne, Peter Jankowski, Patrick Jordan, Tracy Miller, Charles Morris, Dana Schoening, Jeff Shoobridge, Brian Stanley, Mark Tyner, Angela Usher and Steven Wheeler.

Jordan previously applied for the job and was selected by commissioners in 2019 before he backed out of his commitment to remain in Michigan.

He even signed a contract with the county

See MANAGER A3

$2M In Admin Contracts Presented

By TOM STAIK
Of The Herald-Advocate

An estimated $2 million in administrative contracts for the upcoming year were presented to The School Board of Hardee County at their meeting June 8.

Superintendent of Schools Sonja Bennett presented appointments for all but one of the key positions for the upcoming school year.

Not submitted was an appointment to helm Hilltop Elementary School.

Beverly Cornelius, the longtime administrator, will be retiring at the end of her contract at the end of the month. The position is listed as open on the Hardee County School District's job board. Applications will be accepted through June 30.

Appointments included:

Hardee Senior High School: Travis Tubbs, principal; Donna Block, assistant principal, and Chad Douglas, assistant principal.

Wauchula Elementary School: Cristy Bellflower, principal; and Jamilynn Dotson, assistant principal.

North Wauchula Elementary School: Zachary Harvard, principal; and Kelly Wilder Garcia, assistant principal.

Zolfo Springs Elementary School: Sheryl Mosley, principal; and Kristen Rivas, assistant principal.

Hilltop Elementary: Yesenia Roberts, assistant principal.

Hardee Junior High School: Suzanne Stagg, principal; and Brian Kemp,

See CONTRACTS A3

Candidate Cafe 2026 Election



PHOTO BY LILY STRICKLAND

A large audience filled Java Cafe to hear Republican Gubernatorial candidate Byron Donalds speak.

Gubernatorial Hopeful Visits Hardee County

By HARPER SCHUKNECHT
Intern

Java Cafe was hustling and hot from body heat on the afternoon of June 15. The eatery had every table full with visitors, along with many standing on the sides of the room. These guests were waiting to see Byron Donalds, the leading candidate in the Republican primary for the race to become the Sunshine State's next Governor.

Donalds entered the cafe with a smile and a plethora of handshakes and hugs. He greeted the crowd with a simple exclamation.

"How's everybody doing?" Donalds asked, with a bright smile on his face.

Once at the front of the room, Donalds introduced himself to his audience. He thanked the audience for their attendance, and gave a special shout out to one family in the back. Jim Fowler and his wife were sitting at the furthest

See CANDIDATE A3

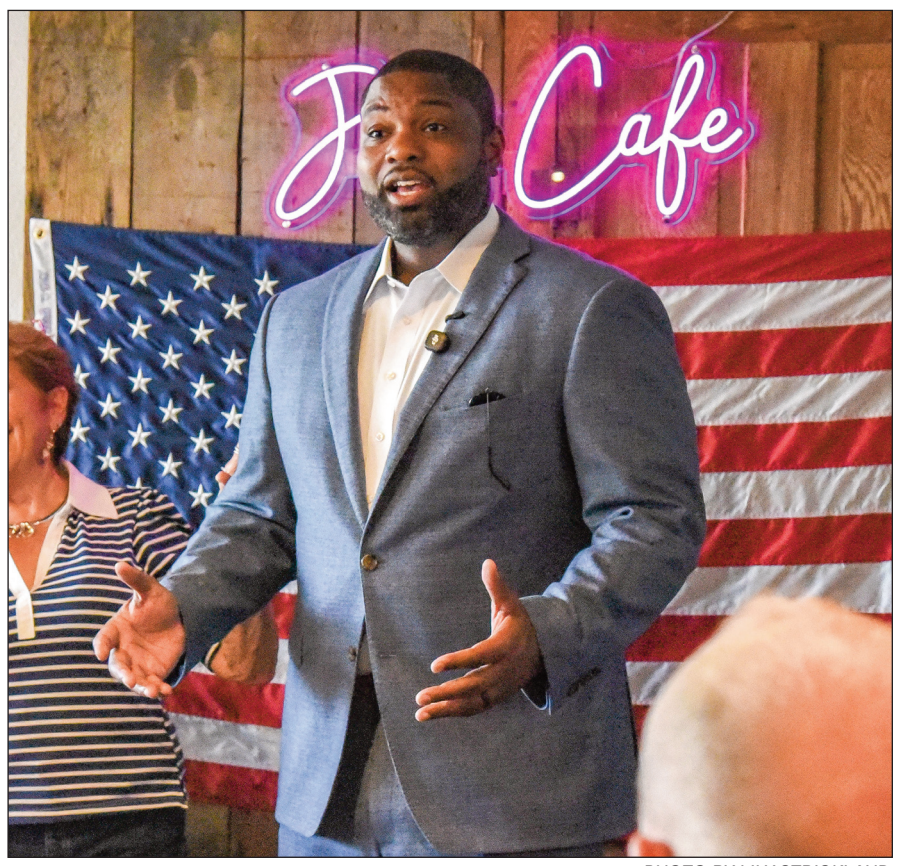
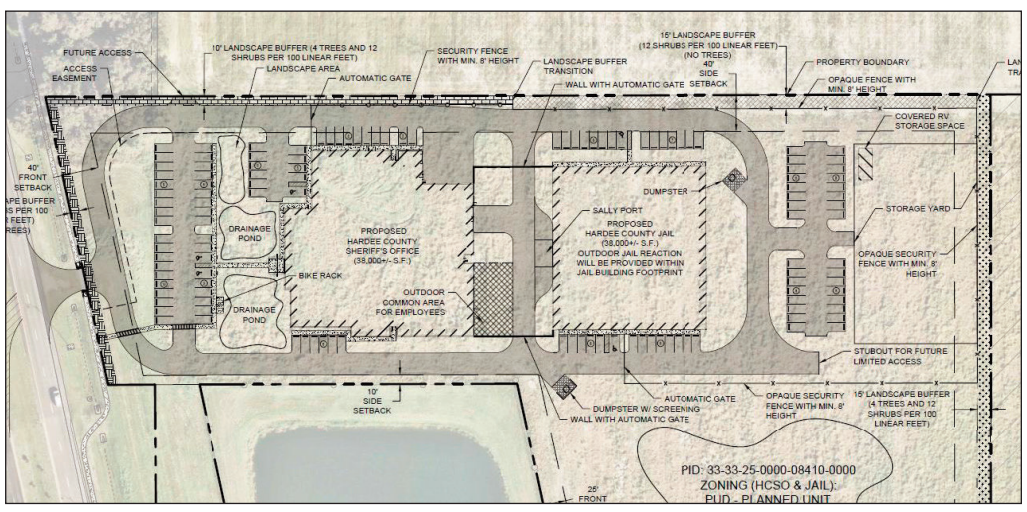


PHOTO BY LILY STRICKLAND

Byron Donalds speaks to the audience at Java Cafe on Monday afternoon.

Sheriff's Pursuit Of New Jail Complex Nearing Capture



COURTESY PHOTO /CITY OF WAUCHULA

Wauchula leaders are one step closer to collaring an approval of a Planned Unit Development plan for the new public safety complex for the Hardee County Jail and Hardee County Sheriff's Office on U.S. 17.

By TOM STAIK
Of The Herald-Advocate

County officials collared an elusive bandit earlier this month after wrangling the cuffs around required zoning for a new public safety complex to house the Hardee County Sheriff's Office and Hardee County Jail.

The Wauchula City Commission voted unanimously June 8 to approve at first reading the conditions of a planned unit development (PUD) plan for the complex.

"A lot of work has gone into this," said Community Development Director Kyle Long.

During last week's meeting, commissioners ultimately opted to eliminate a PUD requirement that would require 50 percent of open space to be dedicated to recreation.

"This regulation was thinking about a

See JAIL A3

WEATHER

DATE	HIGH	LOW	RAIN
06/09	94	71	0.00
06/10	91	74	0.59
06/11	93	71	0.55
06/12	96	71	0.06
06/13	94	72	0.01
06/14	94	72	0.00
06/15	93	70	0.00

Rainfall to 06/15/2026 - 17.20
Same period last year - 11.60
Ten Year Average - 48.80
Source: Univ. of Fla. Ona Research Center

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CANDIDATE

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table from the front with a camera to film the event. They had an integral part in starting Donalds political career. The three first met when Donalds' ran for the state legislature.

"I knocked on their door and asked if I could count on their vote. They asked what I believed in, so I went through it with them. They said 'Just for coming here today, you can surely count on our votes.' And they've been helping me ever since,'" said Donalds.

Many of those in attendance were politically active members of the Republican party, which Donalds applauded. He claimed to have greatly appreciated their work.

"The reason we spend so much time invested in campaigns and politics is because we love our county," affirmed Donalds. "You help Florida stay great, and Florida stays conservative."

Donalds continued his discussions by speaking on some of the goals he would have as governor. A lot of these goals targeted the continuation of current Governor Ron DeSantis's policies, which Donalds greatly approves of. The conservative nature of Florida is something Donalds would want to protect as governor.

"Florida has been the envy of the other 49 states for 30 years now," he said. "People are coming here because they just wanna be left alone."

After his opening speech, the floor was open to questions from the audience.The first question was met with applause from the crowd.

"So," one audience member quipped, "when are you running for president?"

Donalds had a bold answer for this.



PHOTO BY LILY STRICKLAND

Jim Fowler, longtime supporter of Byron Donalds, films the event from the back of the Cafe.

"Well, I don't believe in planning politics," he answered.

One man asked Donalds his solution to the inability for young Floridians to get into the housing market. Donalds answered quickly.

"My job is to make sure…that the Florida dream… is here for them," he said.

Donalds also discussed his competition across the aisle.

"We are going to remind them that Florida is a red state now," said Donalds. "They run campaigns that are as interesting as a glass of milk."

In a mocking voice, he then did his own interpretation of a Democratic candidate

"We believe in unity, and happiness, and working together," Donalds joked as the audience laughed.

Donalds refocused on his previous experience in the Florida and national legislature.

"We've made sure insanity from the radical left does not enter Florida," he claimed.

One of the most anticipated questions was answered next, as a young man questioned Donalds' plans for protecting rural Florida.

"Our state needs regional growth planning," Donalds said. "If you want to preserve ag-lands … every region needs a growth management plan."

Another Hardeean asked whether or not Donalds would keep Governor DeSantis's abortion legislation.

"Of course," Donalds responded. "We should also be investing in pregnancy support centers."

Then, questions were steered towards affordability. Donalds jumped to answer.

"We have to reform our state's regulatory insurance sponsors," he asserted. "Florida's government is going to get modernized."

Donalds continued: "We all have supercomputers in our pockets, there's no reason the government should take forever to build a house."

One of the most heated discussions of the event was regarding the possibility of a data center being built in DeSoto. Several attendees spoke with concern on the matter.

"They are building the largest in the country in DeSoto," a woman told Donalds, to which he responded: "I can assure you that the largest is in Utah."

Donalds discussed the restrictions he would like to see put on new data centers in Florida.

"They shouldn't use our aquifers," he stated, "and they should have to have a water treatment center on site."

Donalds took just a few more questions at the end of the event. One college student home for the summer put her hand up.

"What is your plan to keep college students in Florida after they graduate?" she asked.

"Well," he responded, "people need to be getting degrees that are going to get them somewhere."

"Students have been told they need to go to college to get a job," he continued. "There should be launch pad programs in high school… students can learn trades and go straight into a job after graduating."

Then, addressing the student, he said: "You're a young lady, think about getting married, having kids, and living the dream."

MANAGER

Continued From A1

to become the county manager before changing his mind a few weeks before his scheduled move and start date.

"I am sorry for having to write this, but I am not going to be able to serve as County Manager for Hardee County," he wrote in November of 2019. "After looking closely and thoroughly at all of the factors involved in the move, especially my wife's health, I realize that this move is not the best for us."

The day before he sent the letter to Hardee County Commissioners, Escanaba council members voted to accept Jordan's original resignation and rehired him at a salary of $125,000 per year with 32 paid days off, a $12,500 contribution into his retirement account and his severance package was modified to be paid in full in a lump sum if he is terminated by the city.

He was set to make $105,000 per year here along with a generous benefits package.

Commissioners have scheduled five meetings over the next two weeks to narrow down the field of applicants to a short list before they will conduct in-person interviews with finalist before making a final decision.

The board has scheduled workshops on Thursday at 2 p.m. and another on Friday morning at 8:30, if needed, to review the applications and whittle the candidates down to those which they would like to formally interview.

Formal meetings and interviews with the finalists will take place on Monday June 29 at 8:30 a.m. followed by a reception that evening from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. for community members to meet and interact with the candidates.

The board is then scheduled to make their final decision the following day with a meeting scheduled on Tuesday, June 30, at 2 p.m.

Atchley told commissioners he would work with the incoming manager to ensure an easy and smooth transition.

Current Assistant County Manager Doug Baber did not apply for the job after recently being chosen to be the county manager for Jefferson County.

Commissioners did not include a salary range in the job posting and will have to negotiate a compensation package with whomever they select.

Atchley was paid $155,882 per year along with health insurance reimbursement, a $100 per month cell phone allowance, four weeks of paid time off and the unrestricted use of a county vehicle within the state while conducting county business.

CONTRACTS

Continued From A1

assistant principal.

District Positions: Sherri Albritton, deputy superintendent; Meredith Durastanti, director of adult education; Martha Felix, director of finance; Melanie Henderson, human resources director; Todd Markel, director of information technologies; Tammy Pohl, coordinator of maintenance and transportation, Leigh Lajeunesse, coordinator of food services; Tamara Taylor-Camilo, director of ESE; and Shadow Roberts, safety specialist.

The administrative positions presented – that do not include the open principal position --represent nearly $2 million.

Of those presented, the deputy superintendent has the highest salary at $115,119 annually for Albritton.

Principal salaries range from $109,540 on the high end to $99.795 on the low end. Contracts typically call for a base plus supplement for years of administrative service with a cap at 17 years.

Of the contracts presented, the lowest salary was $83,959 for two of the assistant principals.

Superintendent of Schools Bennett's salary in 2025 was $160,074, according to the Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research. Her salary, along with other constitutional officers, is set by state statute and is not determined locally.

Though several factors can contribute to a higher starting salary, the base salary for a first year teacher in Hardee County is roughly $51,000 a year.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the median individual income for men in Hardee is $41,433 and $32,232 for women. The median household income is $60,489.

JAIL

Continued From A1

subdivision," said Commissioner Russell Graylin Smith.

County officials said the overall site has the potential for the creation of a small walking trail around a dedicated retention area managed by the Florida Department of Transportation, but said they would prefer to focus the appropriation funds on the development of the actual public safety complex.

Commissioner Sherri Albritton agreed that focusing on the complex and not amenities for the surrounding property should be key.

"The walkway around the water, that seems like a waste of money," Albritton said. "Who is going to want to go to the sheriff's office to walk around? If we make it zero they can spend it somewhere else like on landscaping."

Added Mayor Keith Nadaskay: "The intention wasn't to provide recreation."

Commissioners also provided a condition that the eastern boundary of the project – the one closest to Heard Bridge Road and the closest residential properties – would have a 30-foot-wide buffer with 8 trees and 12 shrubs every 100 feet.

The opaque fencing for the jail portion of the complex will be limited to 12-20 feet tall with a provision allowing for razor wire.

Mark Gilliard, chairman of the School Board of Hardee County and a homeowner of property near the proposed complex, argued during public comment that officials regulate the facility's exterior lighting to the extent possible.

"I am sure everyone has been at Wildcat Stadium, or a baseball game or a softball game," Gilliard said. "Even if the lights are pointing down, they are going to give a glow and they are going to give off a lot of light."

Sheriff Vent Crawford spoke to the lighting concerns.

"It is not going to be stadium lighting. It is going to be South Florida State College lighting. It is not going to be any more lit than Walmart and we go by that every day," the county's top cop said.

Commissioners ultimately voted for a condition that: "Lighting will be minimized to the greatest extent possible to limit impacts on surrounding properties."

The proposed administrative complex and jail for the Hardee County Sheriff's Office is slated for a 35.18-acre parcel located east of U.S. 17 and west of Heard Bridge Road. The property is north of Bell Street and south of Tropicana Street.

The property was annexed into the City of Wauchula earlier this year. The parcels in question were originally purchased by the Hardee County Industrial Development Authority and then sold to the Hardee County Board of County Commissioners for $1.3 million in late 2024. The Florida Legislature further approved a $38 million appropriation for design and construction of the complex.

The project gave officials the slip last year after Gilliard mounted a challenge to the site selection process as officials were preparing to hear the Planned Unit Development request. A site selection committee was convened, and, after several noticed meetings, recommended the original site for development.

Final adoption will be considered on July 13 at 5 p.m. at Historic City Hall.

If approved, the project will be cleared to move forward with the permitting process and design of a final site plan.

"They will be cleared from a zoning standpoint," Long said. "They will eventually apply for all of the permitting, the site plan will be reviewed again, and once we approve the site layout, they will go to the county to apply for the vertical construction."

– Hardee Living –



COURTESY PHOTO

The George Washington war tent on display in Citrus Springs Middle School Gym

George Washington War Tent Coming To 'Celebrating America 250 In The Heartland'

By HARPER SCHUKNECHT
Intern

America's semiquincentennial has brought many to reflect on the history of our nation's birth. The Sons of The American Revolution in Withlacoochee took this a step further, bringing that history to life.

The Withlacoochee chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution is showcasing this history at the Celebrating America in the Heartland event with their George Washington tent exhibit.

The tent was originally designed and created by Nathan V. Taylor, but was more recently donated to the Withlacoochee chapter by Jim K. Griffith. George Washington's War Tent acted as both a mobile command center and sleeping quarters for the general. The tent houses three rooms, one for battle planning, one for sleeping, and one for storage. Everything inside the exhibit itself is a labor of love from the Withlacoochee chapter members, who work hard to create realistic and accurate replicas of furniture, flags and even candle holders.

"Just about everything in there is made by one of us," said David Hitchcock, chapter president of Withlacoochee's Sons of the American Revolution chapter.

The tent exhibition offers guests the opportunity to learn by experiencing history, rather than just reading about it in textbooks. For Withlacoochee chapter members, this purpose is very important.

"Being able to experience something so close to real American History is incredible," Hitchcock explained. "You really get to understand why we are called the United States of America."



COURTESY PHOTO

The George Washington war tent on display in Ocala, Fla. in June of last year.

The tent represents a variety of experiences during the war. While George Washington and his men are at the forefront of everyone's minds when entering the tent, they will leave knowing much more about the diversity of those who helped during the Revolutionary War. The exhibit gives information on how women, sometimes referred to as Molly Pitchers, helped the war effort. In addition, the exhibit chronicles "The Black Regiment," a group of African American men who enlisted to fight in the Revolutionary war in return for their freedom.

"The Black Regiment and the women were instrumental in us winning the war," said Hitchcock. "Perfect, no, it's not perfect, it never is. But, we should all be proud of some of our history."

In addition to tours of the tent, the June 26 exhibition will display examples depicting the evolution of the American flag, several authentic Revolutionary War uniforms, and a copy of the Declaration of Independence, which visitors can sign themselves. This is all in an attempt to allow visitors to truly experience the history of America's birth, especially America's next generation.

"I am most proud of when I see children from the schools just in awe of the tent," said Hitchcock. "Getting to touch the replicas, you just can't put a price on that."

Every Vote Counts!

IMPORTANT NOTICE,
HARDEE COUNTY VOTERS

Due to changes in Florida's Congressional District boundaries, Hardee County is now in Congressional District 16. Because of this change, all registered Voters in Hardee County will be receiving new Voter Information cards in the mail.

THIS CARD IS FOR INFORMATION PURPOSES ONLY!!! It CANNOT be used as identification to vote. When voting, Voters must still present an acceptable form of photo and signature identification, **as required by Florida Statute.**

If you have any questions, please contact the Hardee County Supervisor of Elections Office by telephone (863-773-6061), in person (131 K. D. Revell Rd., Wauchula, FL) or via email (INFO@HARDEEFLVOTES.GOV).

Diane Smith, MCFEP,
Hardee County Supervisor of Elections

6:11,18c



COURTESY PHOTO

Furniture inside the George Washington tent exhibition is created by members of the Withlacoochee chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution.

Educating The Next Generation Of Cattle Ranchers



PHOTO BY LILY STRICKLAND

Dr. João Bittar showcases specimens while explaining the details of pregnancy in cattle.

By HARPER SCHUKNECHT
Intern

The future of agriculture is here in Hardee, and the University of Florida's Ona Cattle Research and Education Center is making sure that future is ready for the many challenges of cattle ranching. The Center holds a youth field day event every June, which gives students the chance to learn about the many aspects of beef production, from birth to butchering.

The warm summer morning of June 11 was a busy one in Ona, with 128 attendees showing up for the seventeenth annual youth field day event. Andrea Dunlap, who started the program almost two decades ago, was excited for the day to start.

"I was very blessed to start this 17 years ago, and I hope it continues. It is really a great event," she explained. "For me, it's a labor of love."

Students from ages 8 to 18 participated in the educational program, being sorted into groups and rotating between the five classes. These five classes taught students about a variety of subjects, truly demonstrating how diverse subjects in the cattle industry can be.

One class students attended covered the female reproductive system of a cow. This class was taught by Dr. João Bittar and Sheri Trent. The instructors taught students about anatomy, artificial insemination, fetal development, and more.

"Understanding these structures helps explain how reproduction occurs and why proper care is needed for successful outcomes," course materials explained.

Students put on gloves and were able to interact with actual anatomical structures. A cow uterus was handled by Dr. Bittar, who demonstrated to students where a fetal calf would be in the structure. Students felt the structure with amazement in their eyes

Another class, taught by Hance Ellington and Khalil Meliane, focused on the tracking of animals using telemetry. Telemetry uses sources like GPS tracking to collect data on the movement and activity of animals. This class discussed the use of telemetry not only on Cattle, but also coyotes.

"GPS collars help us learn where, when, and how long cattle graze. They also help us study how wildlife and cattle use the same places," stated course materials.

Telemetry also allows researchers to track the movements of coyotes in their native habitats, noting revisited paths as well as longer, one-off journeys.

See CATTLE B2



PHOTO BY LILY STRICKLAND

Jennifer Griffin of Dakin Dairy explains to students how to milk a cow with equipment.



PHOTO BY LILY STRICKLAND

Eight-year-old Reese Lanier listens attentively to New World Screwworm presentation.



PHOTO BY LILY STRICKLAND

Laura Bennett holds gallon jugs equal to the amount one cow drinks in a day.

CATTLE



PHOTO BY LILY STRICKLAND

Nine-year-old Ella Johnson learns how to check a cow for pregnancy.



PHOTO BY LILY STRICKLAND

Eight-year-old Harlynn Thomas observes honeybees at the Florida Farm Bureau booth.

A highly-anticipated course on the new world screw worm was also taught at the youth field day. The new world screw-worm has very recently made a reappearance in the States after years of being eradicated. Dr. Natalie Sallent, Miranda Middleton, and James Gray taught the students about the dangers of the pest.

"Screwworm infestations begin when a female fly lays eggs on a wound or orifice of a live warm-blooded animal," the course materials explained. "Eggs hatch into larvae that burrow into the wound to feed on the living flesh."

Amidst recent cases of new world screwworm infections in Texas and New Mexico, the course warned of the effects a full outbreak could have in the United States.

"Another incursion into the United States could cost millions of dollars from livestock losses, trade embargoes, and eradication work. Pets, livestock, wildlife, and even people may suffer and die from screwworm myiasis," course materials stated.

Laura Bennett and Morgan Yoder taught a course on what they labelled the most important part of cattle's health and nutrition: water.

"Water is the most critical, yet frequently overlooked, nutrient for cattle, comprising over 50–80% of their body weight and 85% of milk," said course materials.

The instructors explained to the students the importance of water in cattle ranching, and taught students the dangers of water contamination to cattle health. Excess nutrients, algae, and microbacteria could all lead to a decrease and your herds health, so monitoring water conditions is key.

"To raise healthy cattle, provide your cattle with plenty of clean, cool water," course materials asserted.

A final course taught students about the end of a meat cow's life cycle: cuts. Kendall Gill and Allie Williams taught students about how beef products are produced, and how their quality may be affected by a cow's health.

"Beef comes from cattle, and the way cattle are raised and cared for affects the safety,
tenderness, and flavor of the meat," course materials said.

Students also learned about different cuts of beef, and why they may taste or look different from another.

"Beef comes from the muscles of cattle. Some muscles work harder than others, and that affects how tender the meat will be. Muscles used less often, such as those along the back, are usually more tender. This is where cuts like ribeye, T-bone, and tenderloin come from. Muscles used more for movement, such as the brisket and round, are less tender and are often cooked slowly to become flavorful and juicy," course materials explained.

After the program ended, students and parents had learned a great deal about cattle care, research, and pests. For Dunlap, this is always an exciting thing to see.

"The kids are always so receptive." Dunlap added.



PHOTO BY LILY STRICKLAND

Dr. João Bittar guides students to feel the head of a fetal calf in a cow uterus.