

TerraNova accuses residents of defamation in lawsuit

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TerraNova launched a lawsuit against two Myakka City residents, accusing them of defaming the equestrian center's de-

velopment plans in social media posts. Lindsey Leigh and her husband, Edward Engquist, are being sued by TerraNova's owner, Steve Herrig, based on social media posts he says are false and defamatory. The legal action

escalates a tense battle between the two sides who do not agree on whether rural Myakka land should be developed. Leigh has become an outspoken voice for many Myakka residents concerned about development in the area, specifi-

cally with how it would impact the Myakka River and the rural lifestyle that residents in the area enjoy. Leigh's recent posts have focused on TerraNova's request to increase density for its Estates at TerraNova housing project. Ter-

raNova recently rescinded the rezoning request that would have changed the minimum lot size from 5 acres to 1 acre. At the time, TerraNova said in a statement provided to the Bradenton Herald that it welcomed thoughtful community discussion. "We want Myakka residents to know they are being heard, and we encourage future dialogue to help guide the path forward," Herrig's statement said. But court records show that two days earlier, TerraNova had

SEE TERRANOVA, 3A



Adobe Kava, 1302 13th Ave West, Bradenton on September 25, 2025.

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Business owners seek compromise on kratom proposal

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BRADENTON As Manatee County officials consider a ban on kratom, local businesses that sell drinks containing the herbal supplement are asking for a compromise.

Owners of Adobe Kava and Kava Social Club in downtown Bradenton say a complete kratom ban would take away half of their business. The two businesses joined forces with a group called Operation Kratom to oppose the ban and approach county officials with other potential solutions.

"We formed very quickly after we were alerted that there was an ordinance going in to ban kratom. The purpose of Operation Kratom is to tell the side of kava bars in the area and the impact that it would have on our communities that we've developed," said Andrew Schroeder, general manager of

Adobe Kava, 1302 13th Ave. W., Bradenton. In early September, Manatee County commissioners approved a motion directing county staff to look into an ordinance that would ban kratom and other designer drugs

SEE KRATOM, 5A

State buys 2,500 acres to protect drinking water source

BY RYAN BALLOGG
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A 2,500-acre land purchase approved by state leaders on Tuesday will help protect an important drinking water source for Manatee County and Southwest Florida, conservationists say. The ranchlands sit on over six miles of Oak Creek, a tributary of the Peace River. The 105-mile river is a major drinking water source for Southwest Florida, providing around 26 million gallons per day to nearly 1 million people, according to

the Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority. Manatee County is a member of the authority. The state agriculture department's Rural and Family Lands Program will pay \$9.4 million for a conservation easement on 2,559 acres of Bentley Ranch in southeastern Hardee County, according to public records. In a conservation easement, a landowner continues to live and work on the land but permanently gives up the right to develop it, leaving it in a semi-natural state. The purchase will also add a missing piece to the Florida Wildlife Corridor.



LAUREN YOHO Wildpath

Florida officials have approved a 2,500-acre conservation easement at Bentley Ranch in Hardee County. Conservationists say it will protect the Peace River, an important drinking water source for Southwest Florida and Manatee County, and add a critical piece to the Florida Wildlife Corridor. The easement deal was arranged by Florida Conservation Group (FCG), a Venice and Myakka City-based nonprofit that connects rural land owners with conservation programs.

SEE WATER, 5A

Substitute teacher accused of lewd conduct, sheriff says

BY MICHAEL MOORE JR.
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BRADENTON Deputies arrested a substitute teacher at a Bradenton elementary school after a 10-year-old student reported inappropriate behavior, according to the Manatee County Sheriff's Office. The sheriff's office said they arrested 26-year-old Malik Belvin on Tuesday on a charge of lewd and lascivious conduct after the principal of Abel Elementary School reported student complaints, including one girl's account that he pulled her into a closet. Investigators said the complaints came to light when the regular classroom teacher returned last week and multiple students described feeling uncomfortable with Belvin's behavior. When the principal followed up on the complaints, deputies said one girl reported that Belvin allegedly pulled her into a closet and made an "inappropriate request" during school hours. Crimes Against Children detectives interviewed several students and said they found probable cause to arrest Belvin. Deputies said the principal contacted them Monday, and Belvin was arrested the following day. The sheriff's office website shows he remains in custody at the Manatee County Jail without bond. The school notified the staffing agency that provided Belvin, and he was removed from the classroom and restricted from teaching while the case is pending, deputies said.

SCHOOL DISTRICT RESPONDS TO ARREST The School District of Manatee County addressed the incident in a statement on Wednesday. School officials said they have been notified by the sheriff's office of the arrest and are cooperating with law enforcement. The district said Belvin, a former contracted substitute, "has been barred from all District campuses" and that officials are "actively reviewing our processes for background screenings." "Our counselors are available to support students and staff as needed. The safety and well-

SEE SHERIFF, 6A