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FWC approves December bear hunt

Group plans to challenge legality of panel’s vote

James Call
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

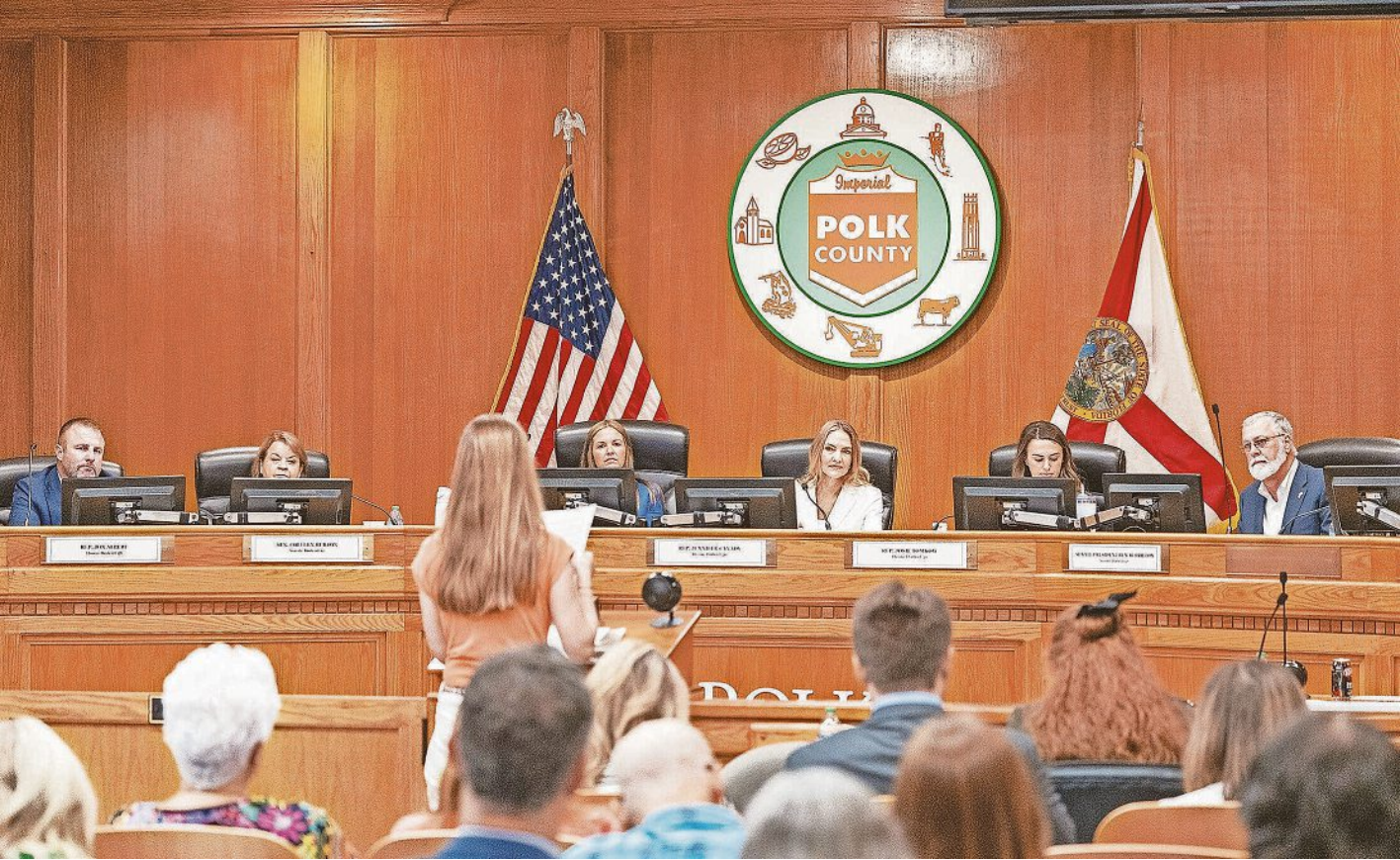
Florida hunters bagged their biggest trophy in memory Aug. 13 when state wildlife officials voted to approve rules that will resume an annual black bear hunting season. At the conclusion of more than two and half hours of public testimony nearly evenly divided between proponents and

opponents, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission voted 5–0 to hold the state’s first black bear season in a decade. It’ll take place over 23 days in December. But an attorney for wildlife group Bear Warriors United said she would immediately file a state administrative challenge to block the hunt. County commissioners and sheriffs from Gulf, Liberty, Jackson, Bay and Franklin County led off public testimony, giving a thumbs up to the FWC’s plan to hold a bear season at the end of the year. They all said a growing bear population has become a problem, with bears

See HUNT, Page 7A



Raquel Levy shares that she will be filing a lawsuit in an effort to block the bear hunt, which was unanimously voted for by the FWC on Aug. 13. ALICIA DEVINE/TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT



A citizen addresses the six members of the Polk County legislative delegation during their annual pre-session public meeting Aug. 12 in the Polk County Commission boardroom in Bartow. PHOTOS BY ERNST PETERS/THE LEDGER

Animal welfare, funding pleas highlight meeting

Polk legislative delegation met Aug. 12

Gary White
Lakeland Ledger
USA TODAY NETWORK

BARTOW — Disappointed with the reception they have received within Polk County, animal advocates addressed their arguments to a higher authority: members of the Florida Legislature. During the annual public meeting of the Polk legislative delegation, a parade of residents implored the lawmakers to help in their quest to change conditions at the Polk County Animal Shelter and to establish a trap, neuter, vaccinate and return program for “community cats.” All six of Polk’s legislators attended the Aug. 12 meeting, held in the Polk County Commission boardroom: Sen. Ben Albritton, R-Wauchula; Sen. Colleen Burton, R-Lakeland; Rep. Jon Albert, R-Frostproof; Rep. Jennifer Canady, R-Lakeland; Rep. Jennifer Kincart Jons-

son, R-Lakeland; and Rep. Josie Tomkow, R-Polk City. The 2026 legislation session begins Jan. 13. The pre-session gathering occurred earlier than usual, as lawmakers will be occupied with committee meetings throughout the fall. The meeting, an invitation for local officials and citizens to share concerns, suggest legislation and request funding for specific projects, drew fewer speakers than in previous years and lasted only two of the allotted four hours. As is their custom, legislators mostly sat silently after their opening introductions and listened to speakers, who were limited to three minutes each. At least nine of the nearly 50 speakers raised concerns about the Polk County Animal Shelter and the policies of the Animal Control division, operated by the Polk County Sheriff’s Office. Some of those advocates had previously spoken at meetings of the Polk County Commission. One of them,

See MEETING, Page 5A



Kelly Kalapp was one of several citizens who raised concerns about the policies and practices of Polk County Animal Control during the annual pre-session public meeting of the Polk County legislative delegation on Aug. 12.

LAKELAND

Symphony conductor says he left after role was reduced

Gary White
Lakeland Ledger
USA TODAY NETWORK

Mark Thielen, the longtime music director and conductor of the Lakeland Symphony Orchestra, has offered more detail on his departure from the organization. Thielen, 70, said that he did not retire but chose to resign after being told that guest conductors would lead two of the LSO’s masterworks concerts. Thielen was nearing his 50th year with the orchestra and its predecessor, the Imperial Symphony Orchestra, originally as a viola performer and since 2001 as conductor. The Ledger reported Aug. 8 on Thielen’s departure, without having heard from him. Thielen said that he did not notice two voicemails left for him until after the article published. Ashley Miller, the LSO’s executive director, had described his departure as a retirement. Thielen emailed a letter on May 11 to

See THIELEN, Page 5A



Mark Thielen, right, said he chose to resign as music director and conductor of the Lakeland Symphony Orchestra after being told that a guest conductor would handle the two premiere masterworks concerts for the 2025-2026 season. SCOTT WHEELER/THE LEDGER

