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Jonathan Layne Moore of McKeel Academy is announced as the 2026 Silver Garland winner in the Science category at the Historic Ritz Theatre in Winter Haven on April 8. PHOTOS BY ANDY KUPPERS/THE LEDGER

Polk plans to expand indigent health care

Paul Nutter
Lakeland Ledger
USA TODAY NETWORK

Healthcare services for Polk County's most vulnerable population could be getting a much-needed boost in the arm.

A consensus of county commissioners agreed at the board's annual retreat March 26 to allocate funding in the 2026-2027 county budget toward the eventual demolition and rebuild of the aging Polk General Hospital.

A rebuild could cost about \$100 million, funded by seed money of \$30 million within the Indigent Health Care Fund, as well as other potential money from the county's general fund and possible state and federal funding as well as grants.

The rationale for possible state funds, for example, is the current campus houses the Health Department and coastal area evacuees could come from across the state to a special needs shelter during hurricane and flooding events.

The nearly 100-year-old facility and surrounding East Bartow campus of buildings house multiple health-related occupants, including the county's Community Health Care, Health and Human Services Division; a Florida Health Department clinic; the Children's Advocacy Center; and the employees' wellness clinic, among others.

The historic Polk General Hospital building is also utilized as a special needs shelter as needed during disaster declarations when hurricanes and flooding events threaten the county's most frail residents.

At the commissioners' annual retreat in Auburndale, they also asked the county attorney to draft an ordinance to increase the income eligibility level for low-income and uninsured

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'Lot of hard work'

Polk seniors honored for service at Silver Garlands

Paul Catala Special to Lakeland Ledger | USA TODAY NETWORK

WINTER HAVEN - The event was one of John "Layne" Moore's prescriptions for success.

For Moore and the other high school seniors, standing on the stage of the Historic Ritz Theatre in downtown Winter Haven the evening of April 8 was the culmination of their high school academic efforts. Beginning at 6 p.m., they were acknowledged at the Silver Garland Awards, an award program honoring students' community service.

Moore was the winner in the Science category, one of 14 categories. A senior at Lakeland's McKeel Academy of Technology, he said his \$1,000 prize will help pay some expenses at Florida State University, where he plans to go in the fall to

pursue a pharmacy degree.

"I was very excited. It was definitely a tough competition with a lot of qualified candidates," he said, after the ceremony. "I'm very proud; I'm seeing a lot of hard work pay off."

The Silver Garland Awards were started in 1976 by The Ledger and were run by the newspaper continuously through 2021. In 2022, the awards were canceled because of staff turnover at The Ledger. But in 2023, Polk County Tourism and Sports Marketing brought the awards back with support from the Polk County Commission and School Board.

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Camille Foreman of Central Florida Aerospace Academy is announced as the winner of the 2026 Silver Garland Award in the Aerospace category.

Former Santa Fe/All Saints baseball coach Carpenter dies at 83

Roy Fuoco
Lakeland Ledger
USA TODAY NETWORK

"Don't be average."

The quote is one of many quotes John Carpenter would say to his baseball players, usually connecting them with bible passages. The quotes and lessons have as much to do with life outside of baseball as they do about playing the



Carpenter

sport he loved so much. That Carpenter cared more about shaping his athletes into productive citizens than he did in shaping them into athletes is quite obvious when family, former players and associates discuss the beloved baseball coach.

It's a considerable assessment especially when you consider Carpenter, who retired with more than 500 career victories, was one of the most successful baseball coaches in Polk County over the final decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st. He was the last county baseball coach to lead his team, Santa Fe Catholic, to a state title for nearly a quarter century until Lakeland Christian won the title in 2019.

Carpenter died on Saturday, one day before Easter. He was 83.

He loved the kids, obviously, he loved coaching," son Jerry Carpenter said. "He had a very good baseball mind. I think the big thing for the kids, and he and I used to talk about this, is that sports is such a great way to teach life. When you're on a team, you got to be able to communicate, you got to be

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