

NM NEWS & VIEWS FOR TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2010
THIS IS THE WORLD WE LIVE IN!

Scheduling problems continue at RGHS:

Rio Grande High School parents and students say the situation at school Tuesday was backed up, chaotic, and did not go smoothly.

APS had told the public earlier that 99 percent of students' schedules had been corrected, but when those schedules were handed out Tuesday, many students disputed the changes.

APS says at least 700 students requested a schedule change on Tuesday for a variety of reasons. At the end of the day, they got through about 400 of those requests, but that wasn't moving fast enough for some very upset parents and students.

"I know people can be critical and second guess what should or shouldn't have happened. But I really think that the district has responded responsibly," explained Superintendent Winston Brooks.

Eyewitness News 4 caught up with Brooks early Tuesday morning as the day started out according to plan. Students filed into the school to face administrators to get their new, revised schedules but parents said things quickly got out of hand.

"They're giving numbers. I mean, her number was 233 and they're on like 100 and something. And then you have to go to the library and get another number. So after waiting a couple hundred for this, you go wait another couple hundred in the library," said Rio Grande parent Francine Fuentes.

Eyewitness News 4 didn't have to look hard to find parents and students who said they'd been waiting for hours to get their student's schedules fixed.

"Most people just want to switch schools. My mom wanted me to switch schools," said Rio Grande student Danielle Fuentes.

Another student said her new schedule put her in freshman classes despite that she's actually a junior. She was hoping to get her schedule fixed on Tuesday, but was number 681 on the list of students waiting to be seen.

"We've been going to the gym and the office and they've been giving us a number," she told us. "Very frustrating cause I really want to learn and it's been about two or three weeks without nothing to learn. We haven't gotten any

education at all. We're just sitting there in class."

"It's a mad house in there. These poor kids. They're all crammed up in the library. It's hot in there. It's already overflowing in there," added Rio Grande parent Ray Delao.

"Everything is messed up still," added parent Francine Fuentes.

"They can be angry and I'm sorry about that. But the fact is, that we're trying to correct this situation and hopefully they'll see some way that they can appreciate that we're actually trying to correct the situation," explained Superintendent Winston Brooks.

APS administrators say there's still no hard number for how many students will have to be reclassified to a lower grade because of a lack of credits. The district also isn't sure how many Rio Grande alumni may have graduated in the past, without the proper credits.

"After all the dust settles, we really do need to sit back and kind of determine where did we goof up and who goofed up and then we need to deal with those situations," Brooks said.

Colorado fire forces residents to make mad dash:

David Myers knew it was time to leave when he looked out into the forest and spotted bright red flames towering skyward. Then came a blinding cloud of smoke and a deafening roar as the fire ripped through the wilderness.

"You can hear just this consumption of fuel, just crackling and burning. And the hardest thing is ... you couldn't see it because at the point the smoke was that thick," he said.

Myers was among about 3,500 people who desperately fled the fire after it erupted in a tinder-dry canyon northwest of Boulder on Monday and swallowed up dozens of homes. Residents packed everything they could into their cars and sped down narrow, winding roads to safety, encountering a vicious firestorm that melted the bumper of one couple's van.

Gov. Bill Ritter declared a state of emergency Tuesday as officials nearly doubled the fire's estimated size to more than 7,100 acres, or 11 square miles. At one point the plume from the fire could be seen in Wyoming, 90 miles to the north.

Authorities investigated reports that the fire started when a car crashed into a propane tank. They are also trying to figure out why an automated phone alert

system failed for two hours during the evacuation, forcing authorities to go door-to-door to search for people in harm's way.

The fire caused no known injuries as residents appeared to get out the area in time. But many spent Tuesday in shelters wondering if their homes still existed. Boulder County Sheriff Joe Pelle said nine volunteer firefighters were among those who lost their homes.

Winds pushed the fire through three canyons where disease, drought and beetles that burrow under the bark have killed pine trees. The so-called bark beetles have killed more than 3.5 million acres of trees in Colorado and southeastern Wyoming and pose a significant wildfire threat.

Gusty winds hampered firefighting Monday, and a squadron of firefighting planes was grounded much of the day Tuesday because smoke covered the canyonlands and obscured targets. A mix of cold and warm air sandwiched smoke over the area but six tankers were cleared to take off later in the day after the inversion began to clear.

Crews managed to save the historic town of Gold Hill, including an Old West grocery store and structures once used for stagecoach stops.

Though westerly dry winds that spread the blaze Monday had eased Tuesday, authorities would not say whether fire lines had been established or speak about the prospect of containing the fire. Boulder County sheriff's Cmdr. Rich Brough said he didn't have that information, frustrating dozens of evacuees who sought refuge in Boulder.

"There's no information about anything. ... I am so frustrated," said Ronda Plywaski, who fled her home with her husband and their two German shepherds and spent the night at an evacuation center at the University of Colorado. "I just want to know if my house is OK."

Closer to the fire, some people were seen crossing unmanned road checkpoints to get a closer glimpse of the damage, angering local officials. Authorities say allowing citizens to travel the area's narrow roads will impede fire crews.

"It's important right now for people who have been evacuated to just be patient. This is a very volatile situation," the governor said after touring the area. His disaster declaration released \$5 million to fight the blaze.

It's still not know how the alert system failed or how that affected the response.

Barb Halpin, a Boulder County spokeswoman, said the first four rounds of calls

that were made through the county's automated phone alert system targeted about 2,500 phone numbers associated with houses near the most threatened areas. Halpin said she didn't know the exact time when the first alerts went out, only that it was immediately after the fire was first reported.

Halpin said the failures happened later in the afternoon when other areas outside the immediate vicinity of the fire were being alerted.

"It's unfortunate that those callouts failed," Halpin said. "We don't know the reason. Obviously, we're investigating," she said.

Halpin said that sheriff's deputies went to the areas where the notifications failed to knock on people's doors and tell them to evacuate.

Brough also repeatedly referred residents seeking information to a county website _ despite the fact some displaced residents wouldn't have easy Internet access.

Residents gathered Tuesday at a mountain overlook to watch the yellowish-brown haze. One of them, Kirk Parker, sipped a beer on the tailgate of his Nissan pickup and spotted the roof of his home with binoculars. It wasn't on fire.

"I think we're safe," Parker said.

Clark Duerr fled from his house with two dogs but left a pet python in a basement aquarium. Like many others, he said he didn't realize the enormity of the fire until he left.

"It definitely came up on us pretty quick," Duerr said. "There was a lot of orange smoke and a lot of frantic people."

Former Bosque Farms police officer sentenced:

A former Bosque Farms police officer has been sentenced for human smuggling.

Ronald Haley, 41, was sentenced Friday by a federal judge in San Diego, California.

In March, Haley was arrested for attempting to smuggle a Mexican woman across the border. Authorities say Haley presented an invalid border crossing card for the woman which turned out to belong to the woman's sister.

Haley was sentenced to time served and two years supervised release. He was also fined \$100.

Whistle-blower continues with investments lawsuit:

SANTA FE, N.M. - A former chief investment officer of New Mexico's educational pension plan is moving ahead with a whistle-blower lawsuit seeking to recover money for the state because of alleged fraud involving public investments.

Albuquerque lawyer Victor Marshall said Tuesday that a court ruling last week keeps alive parts of the lawsuit brought by Frank Foy against Chicago-based Vanderbilt Financial Trust and its related companies over failed investments by the Educational Retirement Board and the State Investment Office.

District Judge Stephen Pfeffer ruled in April that a statute allowing whistle-blower lawsuits can't apply to activities before the law went into effect in July 2007.

Pfeffer last week directed Foy to identify any claims that continue because they involve wrongdoing after that date.

US smoking rate still stuck at 1 in 5 adults:

ATLANTA - U.S. smoking rates continue to hold steady, at about one in five adults lighting up regularly, frustrated health officials reported Tuesday.

About 21 percent of U.S. adults were smokers in 2009, about the same percentage as the year before, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The smoking rate _ which fell dramatically since the 1960s _ has basically been flat since about 2004.

Teen smoking, at nearly 20 percent, has not been improving lately, either.

Health officials believe they've lost momentum because of cuts to anti-tobacco campaigns and shrewd marketing by cigarette companies.

The new report suggests that more than 46 million American adults still smoke cigarettes

"It's tragic," said CDC director Dr. Thomas Frieden, who calls smoking the No. 1 preventable cause of death in the United States. He estimates that smoking kills 1,000 Americans a day.

Some experts were particularly disheartened by a CDC finding in a second report that nearly all children who live with a smoker _ 98 percent _ have measurable tobacco toxins in their body.

Experts say tobacco taxes and smoking bans are driving down rates in some states. But nationwide, they say progress has been halted by tobacco company discounts or lack of funding for programs to discourage smoking or to help smokers quit.

The annual smoking report was based on government surveys. The second report looked at levels in the blood of cotinine, a chemical from tobacco smoke, in a total of more than 30,000 nonsmokers between 1999 and 2008.

Overall, detectable levels of cotinine dropped over the 10 years _ from about 52 percent to 40 percent. That may be due in part to more smoking bans in workplaces, restaurants and other places.

But there were several bits of bad news in that report, too:

_Most of the decline came about 10 years ago.

_More than half of U.S. children ages 3 to 11 are exposed to secondhand smoke, and the CDC says there is no safe level of exposure.

_There's been virtually no improvement for children who live with a smoker, noted Matthew L. Myers, president of Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, a Washington-based research and advocacy organization.

Although the statistics are largely unchanged, advocates said the reports are important. They plan to use the data to pressure national, state and local governments to do more against smoking.

"Without bold action by our elected officials, too many lives, young and old, will suffer needlessly from chronic illness and burdensome health care expenses," Nancy Brown, chief executive of the American Heart Association, said in a statement.

Online:

CDC report: <http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns>

Police officer escorted from wine festival:

Eyewitness News 4 continues digging for more information about an incident that happened at the Bernalillo Wine Festival involving a Rio Rancho police officer.

We've learned that the police department's spokesman, John Francis, was removed from the wine festival for unknown reasons.

According to Sandoval County Sheriff John Paul Trujillo, Francis was escorted off the grounds of the wine festival sometime Sunday.

Trujillo is not sure who escorted Francis out, but he says it was likely Bernalillo police, who were handling security at the event.

We called Francis directly to see exactly what happened. He said he had absolutely nothing to say on the matter, said no new information would be revealed at any point, and then abruptly ended the conversation.

Francis did say that he was on-duty at the wine festival Sunday.

Sheriff Trujillo says various authorities were at the festival conducting an undercover operation where officers were busting underage drinkers.

Though it is unclear exactly why Francis was escorted out of the event, Rio Rancho's Mayor Tom Swisstack said on Tuesday he had learned Francis had tried to break up an argument at the festival.

For some reason, the mayor says Bernalillo police officers then asked Francis to leave.

Thousands stranded by strikes in France, London:

PARIS: Public transit ground to a halt across France and on the London Tube on Tuesday, with tourists and commuters bearing the brunt of a wave of discontent over government austerity measures. French unions challenged unpopular President Nicolas Sarkozy with a major nationwide strike over plans to raise the retirement age from 60 to 62, shutting down trains, planes, buses, subways, post offices and schools.

Across the English Channel, millions struggled to get to work as a strike by London Underground workers closed much of the city's subway system. It was the first of several such 24-hour strikes planned for this fall.

The strikes came as European Union finance ministers met in Brussels amid worries that the government debt crises that alarmed markets worldwide earlier this year could flare up again. The ministers are discussing introducing a levy on banks and whether a tax on financial transactions can deal with another banking crisis.

In France, the strike coincides with the start of debate in parliament over a plan to overhaul the money-losing pension system so it will break even in 2018. The government insists the reform is essential as people are living longer, and it has urged everyone to show "courage" as it tries to chip away at the huge national debt. The French retirement age of 60 is already among the lowest in Europe.

Obama to mark anniversary of Sept. 11 attacks at the Pentagon:

WASHINGTON - The White House says President Barack Obama will mark the ninth anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks at the Pentagon.

Obama spokesman Robert Gibbs says Vice President Joe Biden will travel to New York for Saturday's anniversary. First Lady Michelle Obama will join former first lady Laura Bush in Pennsylvania for ceremonies marking the crash of United Flight 93.

Obama also spoke at the remembrance ceremony at the Pentagon last year, the first anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks since he took office.

NEWS MAKER OF THE DAY:

Mark Doering from Five Talents Oil & Gas, LLC and Time to Revive, which is heard weekdays at 5:30am & 4pm MT with Kyle Martin, joined us this afternoon to talk about Cap & Trade. He also brought Pastor Jimmy to us, who you can hear every Friday at 2:30pm MT. Mark lives in Santa Fe & Dallas, TX, with his wife Joan, both who were responsible for bringing Kyle Martin to Santa Fe, for the revival held there in 2008, after spending 40 days of prayer together. He believes that America can be energy independent and strongly suggests that Natural Gas Products are the way to go, stating that there are already some 11 million vehicles, mostly in Europe that run off that now and it's 50% cleaner than what we're using. I'm sure you'll be hearing a lot more from Mark, so keep listening to us and tell everyone you know about KKIM/KARS Radio!

Many Blessings,

Rev. Mark F. Tross

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