Tragic deaths, U.S. Sugar deal and election recount sum up county's top stories
By Patty Pensa | South Florida Sun-Sentinel

The personal and the political defined Palm Beach County's biggest news stories of 2008.

As the nation was rapt in an historic election, the county left its own stamp on the year ending today with a judicial-race recount that conjured images of Bush vs. Gore in 2000.

Personal tragedies, caused by everything from a dovetailing economy to ravaging weather, stretched across the globe. Locally, the deaths of a firefighter and a popular teenager touched residents throughout the county.

Lives changed in matter of moments
On March 3, Rafael Vazquez, known as Ray, had just finished eating lunch with his wife and young son. While the other two waited outside, the father of five returned to the Wendy's...
Vazquez was a lieutenant for Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue, and more than 1,000 firefighters from across the state attended his funeral. Vazquez was 42.

On March 22, popular teenager Stephanie Kuleba died after going to a Boca Raton doctor's office for corrective breast surgery. Kuleba, 18, was the cheerleading captain at West Boca Raton High School.

Her death renewed concerns about procedures done at outpatient centers and brought a two-word phrase into the vernacular: "malignant hyperthermia." Certain anesthetics trigger the rare genetic condition, but there is no routine test to screen for it.

Kuleba's death made nationwide headlines, and her family set up a Web site, stephaniejudekuleba.org, to raise awareness about malignant hyperthermia.

Deal would reclaim Big Sugar land
It was a blockbuster deal, potentially the largest land purchase in state history. Taxpayers would foot the bill.

On June 24, Gov. Charlie Crist made the momentous announcement in far western Palm Beach County, where U.S. Sugar Corp. has farmed for years. The pitch initially was for the sugar giant to sell the state its entire 187,000 acres, sugar mill and other facilities for $1.75 billion.

The idea was that the land would become part of the state's multibillion-dollar effort to restore water flow from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades. Environmentalists praised the plan, while business interests said it could be devastating to South Florida's sugar industry.

As months passed and the economy weakened, the state and the sugar grower said their pie-in-the-sky deal would be scaled down both in scope and taxpayer expense.

Instead, the state would acquire 181,000 acres for $1.34 billion. U.S. Sugar would keep its mill and other facilities and lease back the land to keep farming for at least seven years. To stay in business long-term, the company could shift into producing biofuels under the deal's latest terms.

The South Florida Water Management District, in charge of Everglades restoration, this month approved the contract, but still could back out before the September closing deadline if the long-term costs are projected to cut into flood-control efforts and water operations.

FAU debate and another recount
If the governor's brokering a massive land deal wasn't enough politics for you, Palm Beach County offered more election fun in 2008.
On Jan. 24, five Republican presidential candidates descended on Florida Atlantic University's Boca Raton Click here for restaurant inspection reports campus for a debate moderated by NBC News anchorman Brian Williams and broadcast on MSNBC.

For playing host, FAU received national publicity and a $250,000 tab, which was paid with donations.

On Aug. 26, an otherwise unremarkable circuit judge's election produced one of the year's longest-running political stories. It wasn't quite the 2000 presidential recount, but the race between incumbent Richard Wennet and lawyer William Abramson resulted in a monthlong recount.

Initially, Wennet was the apparent winner by 60 votes, but after misplaced ballots were found and votes were counted several times, Abramson won by 61.

Although Abramson was certified the winner, Wennet is continuing his appeal and wants a do-over during municipal elections in March. An interesting twist: The state Supreme Court this month suspended Abramson for 91 days based on a complaint Wennet filed against him in 2006.

Is Abramson eligible to serve? That answer should come in 2009.

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Top Palm Beach County news stories of 2008

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Top Palm Beach County news stories of 2008
Top local news stories of 2008

1. Random shooting at a Wendy's restaurant west of West Palm Beach kills Palm Beach County firefighter Ray Vazquez.

2. State announces $1.75 billion deal to buy U.S. Sugar Corp. and its land for Everglades restoration.

3. Palm Beach County, the school district and local communities reduce spending because of economic conditions and state funding cuts.

4. Stephanie Kuleba, 18, dies from malignant hyperthermia during corrective breast surgery.

5. It takes Palm Beach County weeks and multiple recounts to determine the outcome of a race for circuit court judge.

6. A violent four-day crime spree in November hits Dunkin Donuts across South Florida, including one in Delray Beach. In the holdup
in Tamarac, one person was killed. Five people were injured during the spree.

7. In a gruesome murder-suicide, Carol Burger stabbed her estranged wife, Jessica Kalish, 222 times with a Phillips-head screwdriver, then killed herself. The women lived together in Boynton Beach.

8. The Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office releases new information in its investigation of the murder of Randi Gorenberg: Her husband, Dr. Stewart Gorenberg, may have been the intended target.

9. Five Republican presidential candidates debate at Florida Atlantic University before the Jan. 29 primary.

10. FBI agents search the home of Palm Beach County Commissioner Mary McCarty, but everyone stays mum about what they were looking for and what they found.

Top Palm Beach County stories as picked by Sun Sentinel staff

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Housing Bust Voted Top Fla. Story of 2008
12/31/2008
Associated Press (AP) - Miami Bureau
Kennedy, Kelli

Housing bust voted top Fla. story of 2008
By KELLI KENNEDY
Associated Press Writer

MIAMI -- Empty condominiums, stalled construction projects and thousands of families forced to leave their homes in a state hit hard by the housing bust was the top story of 2008, according to Florida newspaper editors.

Some aspect of the crisis topped headlines daily, especially in South Florida where the once-booming condo market bottomed out largely because of overbuilding and speculation. The values of homes, businesses and other properties across Florida declined $153 billion during the last year, according to state officials.

The ripple effect was felt in communities statewide as once busy construction workers and developers now found themselves out of work. Families, some angered at being foreclosed on, tore up plumbing and pipes or trashed the homes before they left.

Even renters took a hit, learning their landlords were being foreclosed on, even though they had faithfully paid their rents.

Crisis hot lines were flooded with desperate homeowners seeking counseling, looking for mortgage assistance or help from food banks.
Foreclosures also spawned some unexpected stories - creating empty subdivisions and spurring the mosquito population which found happy homes in neglected, grimy pools. A Miami homeless advocacy group took advantage of the multitude of foreclosed homes, moving people in as squatters.

Officials launched a foreclosure-prevention program to help homeowners who have fallen behind on their mortgage, with loans of up to $7,500 per household. Experts predict little change for the state's troubled housing market in 2009.

State newspaper editors said Barack Obama's victory in battleground Florida was the No. 2 story of 2008. The Democrat's win avenged the 2000 presidential recount and turned the tide for a state in which Republicans carried two straight presidential elections.

Florida's predominantly black communities that suffered for years with poverty, unemployment and racial tension came to life the day after Obama's historic victory. Tents cropped up selling T-shirts reading "Mission Possible" with Obama's name in glitter and his face in silver studs. A Florida Panhandle barber even etched an image of the president-elect's face on the back of a friend's head.

More financial woes dominated the third and fourth stories of the year - the state budget crisis and rising unemployment rates.

Crashing revenue caused the state to incur a current year deficit of $2.3 billion and a "budget gap" of about $4 billion, maybe more, for the next fiscal year. Agencies have been asked to suggest ways to absorb a 10 percent cut and lawmakers are planning a special session next month to tackle the deficit.

In other bleak news, Florida's unemployment rate rose to 7.3 percent in November, its highest level in 15 years. That means 680,000 people were jobless in Florida.

In what could be the state's most expensive conservation land deal, the billion-dollar bid to buy land from U.S. Sugar for Everglades restoration was next on the list at No. 5.

The South Florida Water Management District recently approved a plan for U.S. Sugar Corp. to turn over about 285 square miles of land. The ambitious Everglades restoration plan will cost the state $1.34 billion. Local officials expressed concern about the cost of the deal when the state was in the midst of an economic crisis.

Environmentalists have fought for years to restore natural water flow to the Everglades after decades of overdevelopment and farming.

The Tampa Bay Rays came in at No. 6 after making headlines when they dropped "Devil" from their name and wound up winning the American League pennant, dramatically ending a decade of futility. They won a franchise-best 97 games, but lost the World Series to the Philadelphia Phillies in a five-game series.

Florida's No. 7 story created a national media frenzy when little Caylee Anthony disappeared from central Florida in June, even though her mother did not report the toddler missing until July. In a story filled with twists and turns, including a massive search and bounty hunters, the 3-year-old's remains were found recently in
the woods near her grandparents home. Her mother, Casey Anthony, was charged with her murder two months ago.

Some good news on the hurricane front. Although Tropical Storm Fay drenched Florida in August, the state dodged a direct hit from a hurricane for a third-straight year. That story was No. 8.

Next were two state judges who overturned the state's gay adoption ban in separate cases, setting up an appeal to the Florida Supreme Court. A Miami-Dade County judge said the 31-year-old law violates equal protection rights for the children and their prospective gay parents, rejecting the state's arguments that there is "a supposed dark cloud hovering over homes of homosexuals and their children." Florida is the only state with an outright ban on gay adoption.

It was a tie for the No. 10 slot between early voting and Democratic U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney's scandal.

Florida again made national headlines during the election as residents stood in lines that snaked around buildings for several hours during early voting. More than 2.6 million of Florida's 11.2 million registered voters cast their ballots in the early period between Oct. 20 and Nov. 2.

Mahoney lost his re-election bid after revealing he's had several affairs. The district's seat has been a magnet for scandal. Mark Foley held the position before Mahoney, but resigned from Congress in 2006 after his sexually explicit computer messages to male teens became public.

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NAPLES

NAPLES — The foreclosure and unemployment crisis that stared down Southwest Florida in 2008 was the top story of the year, based on reader responses to a poll at naplesnews.com.

On that much, the responding readers and Daily News-naplesnews.com editors agreed. The editors also chose the crisis, which saw Lee among the nations top foreclosure markets and Collier hitting record foreclosure numbers for the county, as the top 2008 story.

Beyond that, the editors and readers both placed in their top three the early signs of a recovery to the beleaguered real estate market, with more sales but declining median prices. That was the second biggest story of the year to readers, and the third biggest to the editors. Readers third choice was the late May wildfire that burned several homes in Golden Gate Estates, followed at No. 4 by the shooting death of Fort Myers Police Officer Andrew Widman by an East Naples man.

The 50 or so readers who filled out the story survey at naplesnews.com chose the dispute over whether to lease Alligator Alley as No. 5. The dozen Daily News editors who ranked the stories had that as No. 12. Readers No. 6 was the mistrial of Fred Cooper in the 2006 killings of a Gateway couple caught up in a love triangle; No. 7 and No. 8 was a tie between Tropical Storm Fay and the hiring of a private company to take over janitorial services for Collier County public schools.

No. 9 was the governors proposed buyout of U.S. Sugar to benefit Everglades restoration. The 10th spot for readers went to the Collier County sheriffs deputies shooting of an immigrant who pulled what appeared to be a gun on officers at a traffic stop. Readers didnt choose among their Top 10 this favorite of the editors: The visit by several presidential candidates and President George W. Bush, which editors ranked No. 2.

Readers also differed from editors over the Top 10 importance of the Red Sox deciding to keep spring training in Lee County, flooding in Bonita Springs and the election of Kevin Rambosk as Colliers new sheriff. Editors chose those, but readers didnt.