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LIKE NEW YEAR'S EVE

Thousands of tourists flock to Chincoteague Island for 98th Pony Swim

By Gabby Jimenez | Staff writer

CHINCOTEAGUE — Amanda Savage refers to the week of Chincoteague's Pony Swim as "Chincoteague Christmas."

Savage works at Michael's Jewelry inside Village Mall and compares the thousands of spectators coming to the island during the last week of July with New Year's Eve in Times Square. Many workplaces close for the day to allow people to participate in the festivities.

"A lot of the locals consider it like our own personal holiday," she said.

About 200 ponies swam across the Assateague Channel on Wednesday, continuing the 98-year island tradition. It was the second year after a two-year pause during the pandemic.

Once at Chincoteague, the ponies received veterinary care to get ready for auction. This year, 72 ponies sold for a total of \$489,000, accord-

ing to the Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce. Funds go toward the animals' care and to local fire departments.

The Pony Swim gained popularity after the publication of Marguerite Henry's award-winning children's book, "Misty of Chincoteague," in 1947. The film "Misty," based on the book, was released in 1961.

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Top: About 200 ponies swim from Assateague Island to Chincoteague Island on Wednesday during the 98th Chincoteague Pony Swim. Above: Tallula Loeb, 9, and Felix Loeb, 7, of Ojai, California, eat cereal at 6 a.m. Wednesday after crossing the marsh to secure a spot to watch the swim. TESS CROWLEY/STAFF PHOTOS

'Street museum' project launched

Murals to add color to buildings, underpasses in Newport News

By Josh Janney
Staff Writer

NEWPORT NEWS — The city is about to look much more colorful in the next few weeks, as the city is partnering with the Contemporary Arts Network Foundation to create a city-wide mural project.

Regional and national muralists are painting buildings and underpasses this summer. The mural initiative, dubbed the "Newport News Street Museum," will highlight diverse locations throughout the city while encouraging placemaking, promoting tourism, and strengthening community and regional connections.



Austin "Auz" Miles, of Richmond, works on her mural on Jefferson Avenue, using a photo of Ella Fitzgerald. Miles chose the legendary singer because she was born in Newport News. BILLY SCHUERMAN/STAFF

"We wanted to get some imagery, some colors, some positive message up on the walls to just beautify and uplift the neighborhoods," said longtime Newport News resident Asa Jackson, executive director of the CAN Foundation.

Jackson said driving to work and school on Jefferson Avenue and Warwick Boulevard can sometimes be "monotonous" and the foundation and the city hoped to add "some

positivity and color." He said the murals contain a mixture of historical icons from the city, varying design elements and some positive messages. For example, one mural says, "Best Life."

"To see a big, bright mural just reminding you that this is your only life, so make it your best life, I think is a nice little juxtaposition in people's days

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DEFENSE BILL

Kaine puts mental health at forefront

By Caitlyn Burchett
Staff writer

Service member mental health is a top priority for Sen. Tim Kaine in the upcoming defense spending bill in the wake of Hampton Roads-based suicide clusters.

The Senate voted Thursday night to advance its version of the National Defense Authorization Act, which supports \$886.3 billion in funding. The House passed its version earlier this month. The chambers must reconcile the versions before the final bill goes to President Joe Biden's desk.

Included in the Senate's bill are several provisions Kaine advocated that would expand and improve service members' access to mental health services and a housing

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PORTSMOUTH

City in talks about collective bargaining

Firefighters, EMTs try to secure rights for employees

By Natalie Anderson
Staff writer

PORTSMOUTH — Firefighters and emergency workers are again attempting to secure collective bargaining power for city employee organizations to negotiate for better wages, safety measures and working conditions.

The International Firefighters Association Local 539, founded in 1937 and made up of nearly 200 full-time Portsmouth firefighters and paramedics, sent authorization cards to the city last week, displaying support from about 90% of its members, according to union president Lt. Kurt Detrick.

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INSIDE

Keep up with Trump charges

What to know about the documents case involving the former president after he was indicted on three additional charges, and a look at what's next. **Nation & World, Page 10**

Wide receiver changes sides

Ali Jennings, who helped Old Dominion upset Virginia Tech last season, has joined the Hokies — the team he says he always wanted to play for. **Sports**

Defense plan in the garden

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HUMID, HOT P.M. STORM

High: 95 Low: 75

Details on the back of news



“A lot of them are here in town for the whole week, so you know, eating in our restaurants, staying in our hotels, shopping in our shops. So it’s certainly a huge economic impact. You know, some of the small businesses will tell you that they will have a better week this Pony Penning week than they will the whole first quarter of the year.”

— Evelyn Shotwell, the executive director for the Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce



Ponies are rounded up Sunday by the Saltwater Cowboys at the Northern Corral.



A young spectator plays in the marsh before Wednesday’s Chincoteague Pony Swim.



Chincoteague ponies rest Wednesday after swimming from Assateague Island to Chincoteague Island. After the swim, the ponies are sold at auction. This year, 72 were sold for nearly \$500,000.

Swim

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Now the ponies have statewide recognition after legislation naming the Chincoteague as Virginia’s official state pony was signed by Gov. Glenn Youngkin and took effect July 1.

A boost for rural tourism

Thousands of tourists from around the world flocked to the island town for the annual event.

“A lot of them are here in town for the whole week, so you know, eating in our restaurants, staying in our hotels, shopping in our shops,” said Evelyn Shotwell, the executive director for the Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce.

“So it’s certainly a huge economic impact. Some of the small businesses will tell you that they will have a better week this Pony Penning week than they will the whole first quarter of the year.”

Shotwell said the island hosted an array of activities throughout the week, including a carnival hosted by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company, performances by the Chincoteague Pony Drill Team and free showings of “Misty” at the Island Theatre.

Ozmar, a cook at Flamingos, a food truck on the island, said the tourism builds up during the summer and “goes through the roof” for the Pony Swim.

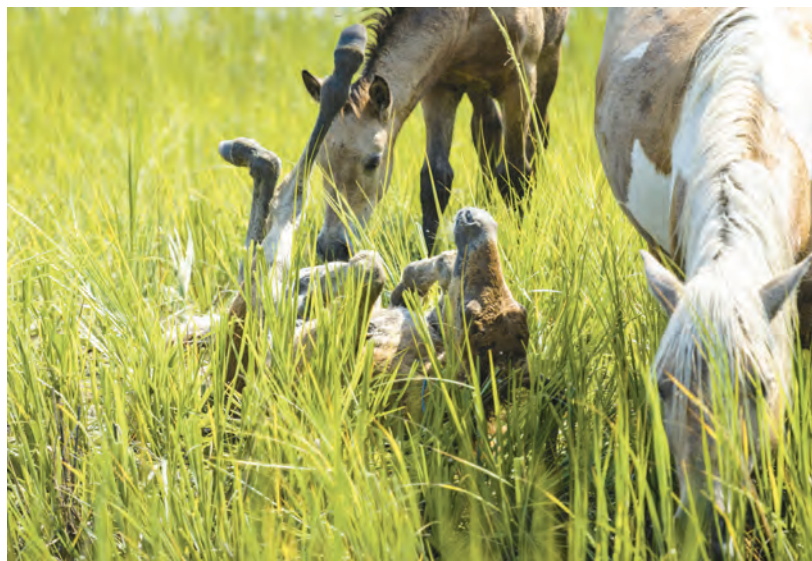
Ozmar also helps run Obsession Studios, a gallery and art supply store in Village Mall owned by his girlfriend. During the past few days he said people were waiting outside the studio before it opened. Like many businesses catering to the Pony Swim tourists, Ozmar creates horse statues to sell, despite not being a big fan of the event.

“Traffic in the mall has multiplied in the past week by a factor of 10,” he said. “There’s just so many people coming in, wandering through, looking around all hours.”

But when the Pony Swim is over, Ozmar said sales for many businesses in town “absolutely dies.”



The Saltwater Cowboys guide ponies at daybreak Monday from the Northern Corral to the Southern Corral along the Atlantic Ocean.



A foal plays in the marsh after swimming from Assateague Island to Chincoteague Island on Wednesday. **TESS CROWLEY/STAFFPHOTOS**

“On a busy weekend this is a touristy beach town, and in the middle of the off-season it’s rural Virginia, like, countryside Virginia,” he said.

Cathy Heimer, owner of the Island Artisans boutique, changes her store hours for the weeks leading up to the swim to be open seven days a week. Heimer will start operating five days a week around Labor Day, then four until

she’s only open three days a week by Thanksgiving.

“I make a lot of my money during the summer,” Heimer said.

Kally Rasinski grew up in the Chincoteague area and works at Sunations, a beach apparel store with bike and scooter rentals. Residents on the island benefit from the increased tourism, particularly as new attractions are built or buildings get upgrades, she said.

“With the tourism, the island is continuously growing,” Rasinski said, noting the ropes course that just opened next door.

‘Like a homecoming’

Hotels on the island are often booked throughout the last week of July. The Comfort Suites Chincoteague and Key West Cottages were both at 100% capacity for the week, said Nicole Miller, the director of sales and service.

“It’s kind of like a homecoming, so people that have ever lived on Chincoteague in their life always come back for the Pony Swim,” she said.

Many pony enthusiasts arrived to the swim before sunrise Wednesday, armed with lawn chairs, shower curtains and towels to sit on. Spectators were covered with mud up to their knees from wading through the marsh to get to their spots.

Sarah Case was at the marsh at 5 a.m., five hours before the swim, with daughter Gwendolyn, 10. The two “Misty” fans drove from St. Louis, hoping to buy a horse. To pass the time, Gwendolyn looked at pictures of the horses on her phone and thought about what she’d name it.

The trip to Chincoteague, which included stops to Williamsburg and Virginia Beach, is personal for Case.

“It’s been on my bucket list since I was younger than her,” she said of her daughter.

This year was Diane McKinley’s fourth time seeing the Pony Swim. She comes to Chincoteague from Philadelphia often and even convinced her camera club to come this year.

Together, the group stayed at an Airbnb and shopped and ate at local businesses around the island throughout the week.

McKinley plans on coming back for more Pony Swims in the future.

“I think everybody ought to experience it at least once,” she said.

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