

Officials urge drivers to use caution this Memorial Day weekend

BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

This Memorial Day weekend follows a week of deadly crashes across the Mountain Empire — leading officials to ask drivers to use extra care while traveling.

The Virginia State Police reports that 22 people died between May 21-26 across the state. Of the 22 traffic fatalities, five were motorcyclists, two were bicyclists and one was a pedestrian, the VSP said in a news release.

In addition, two people have died since Wednesday in Southwest Virginia, including a truck driver in Smyth County and a vehicle passenger in Tazewell County, according to the VSP. In both crashes, the drivers lost control of their vehicles, causing them to overturn. On Thursday, the truck driver crashed along Interstate 81 in Smyth County and a Honda Civic driver crashed on Governor C.G. Peery Highway.

With more people on the road

than last year, due to COVID-19 restrictions being lifted, officials in Tennessee and Virginia are asking people to use caution when driving.

“As a state of normalcy returns to Virginia’s roadways and families head out for summer adventures, motorists need to remember that as traffic increases so should their vigilance and patience,” said VSP Col. Gary T. Settle in a news release. “During this holiday weekend, Virginians will see traffic numbers that we haven’t experienced in close to a year. All drivers need to remember to not only comply with posted speed limits, but to also be patient and alert for added congestion on our roads.”

Starting Friday, the VSP has joined law enforcement around the country for Operation Crash Awareness Reduction Effort, a state-sponsored, national program intended to reduce crashes, fatalities and injuries due to impaired driving, speed and failing to wear a seat belt.

The 2021 Memorial Day statistical counting period began Friday and continues through midnight Monday. All available VSP troopers and supervisors are on patrol through the holiday weekend to help keep traffic moving safely and responsibly, the VSP said.

During the 2020 Memorial Day Operation C.A.R.E initiative, Virginia troopers arrested 70 drunk drivers and cited 2,469 speeders, the release states. Troopers issued 224 citations for failing to wear a seat belt and eight individuals lost their lives in traffic crashes. In addition, VSP personnel assisted 1,460 disabled motorists across Virginia during last year’s Memorial Day weekend.

This year, the Memorial Day Operation C.A.R.E. initiative falls within the annual “Click It or Ticket” campaign. This helps to further emphasize the lifesaving value of seat belts for every person in a vehicle, the release states.

“Just within the past six days, 22 people have lost their lives on a Virginia roadway. Preliminary data shows at least eight of those were not wearing a seat belt, to include a 10-year-old boy. Eight lives that may have been saved with the simple click of a seat belt. It’s an easy decision to make — buckle up. And buckle up everyone riding in your vehicle,” said Settle.

The Tennessee Highway Patrol also plans to increase patrols and use a variety of traffic safety enforcement tools to reduce the number of serious injury and fatal crashes across the state during this year’s Memorial Day holiday period. The THP will conduct saturation patrols, seat belt and sobriety checkpoints, as well as increased visibility on high-crash corridors throughout the summer to reduce serious injury and fatal crashes, the THP said in a news release.

“Memorial Day signals the start

of summer travel,” said THP Col. Matt Perry. “We are coming out of a pandemic that created severe and unique challenges for us all. With this, we see traffic fatalities on the rise. Now that more vehicles are getting back on the road, we need you now more than ever to drive safe.”

“Troopers will be proactively enforcing speeding, driving under the influence, seat belt and reckless driving laws this weekend and throughout the summer months,” Perry said. “These avoidable behaviors have continuously been identified as contributing factors to injury and death on the roadways of Tennessee.”

Last year, 12 people were killed in vehicle crashes during the Memorial Day weekend in Tennessee, the THP said. State troopers arrested 144 individuals on suspicion of DUI and ticketed 801 motorists for violation of the seat belt law during last year’s holiday in Tennessee.

Briefly

One person killed in I-81 crash

MARION, Va. — A truck driver died of injuries sustained in a single-vehicle crash Thursday night on Interstate 81 in Smyth County.

A tanker-truck traveling south ran off the left side of the interstate near the 50 mile marker and overturned in the median, the Virginia State Police said. A portion of the truck ended up blocking the northbound lanes.

Crews worked into Friday morning to drain the tanker and return it to an upright position. VSP said the driver, who has not been identified, was taken to the hospital and died of his injuries. The crash remains under investigation.

The Embers to perform at Bristol stadium

BRISTOL, Va. — The Embers, a beach music group, will perform July 9 in Bristol to benefit the Bristol Virginia Public Schools Education Foundation.

The group, featuring Craig Woolard, will perform at the Gene Malcolm Stadium/ Virginia High School Football Field at 7 p.m. All proceeds of the beach music concert go towards the foundation, a non-profit 501 (c)3 organization, according to a news release.

“We are so excited to have beach music legends, The Embers, featuring Craig Woolard, come to Bristol this summer,” said Vicie Dotson, the foundation’s director. “We are incredibly proud to be able to host a live concert fundraiser for our tenth anniversary as a Foundation. We know how much the community here loves supporting live music, and the community has also been such a support for us through our fundraisers over the years.”

Tickets are available at <https://www.itickets.com/events/453167>.

Transportation secretary to visit closed interstate bridge

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg will visit the Interstate 40 bridge connecting Tennessee and Arkansas that’s been indefinitely closed after a crack was found in one of its steel beams.

The U.S. Department of Transportation on Friday announced that Buttigieg will visit Memphis on Thursday to see the bridge spanning the Mississippi River.

The bridge visit comes as President Biden is pushing for a major infrastructure package, while Republican senators want a more modest investment in roads, highways and other traditional public works projects.

The I-40 bridge connecting Memphis and the Arkansas city of West Memphis was shut down May 11 after inspectors found a crack in one of two 900-foot horizontal steel beams that are critical for the bridge’s structural integrity.

Officials have said the bridge could be closed for months. The first phase of repairs to the bridge were completed this week, and Tennessee transportation officials said they hope to release a schedule next week for the bridge’s reopening.

From staff and wire reports

I.C. FOWLER HOUSE



MARIA BASILEO | BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Tom and Vickie Mitoraj bought the I.C. Fowler House at 417 Spencer St. in Bristol, Virginia two years ago and recently finished restoring it.

THE FIRST GUEST

One of Bristol’s oldest homes restored; original owner’s great-granddaughter first overnight guest

BY MARIA BASILEO

BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

BRISTOL, Va. — A home built prior to Bristol, Virginia’s incorporation has been reimagined following two years of restoration by a Washington County couple.

“The primary reason I bought it is to give back to Bristol,” said owner Tom Mitoraj. “This town has been wonderful to me, and I saw this as the oldest house and it was falling down. I had the means to do it (restore it).”

After driving by multiple times and wondering what was being done, Mitoraj and his wife, Vickie, bought the I.C. Fowler House on Spencer Street. They had no prior experience in restoring old homes, but he had a love for Greek revival architecture.

The Mitorajs are hosting a reception at the house today from noon until 2 p.m., featuring a special guest. Rita Springer, 93, of Anniston, Alabama, Fowler’s great-granddaughter, became the restored home’s first overnight guest Thursday.

Vickie Mitoraj said having her as the first guest was important to her husband.

“It’s just a joy,” Rita Springer said. “It’s such a wonderful thing.”

It’s a thrill, she continued, to see someone buy the house, take care of it and love it as much as she would have.

“They’ve done a perfectly beautiful job with the restoration,” she said.

Rita Springer spent her childhood living around the world from Vermont to Germany to the Philippines, but always found her way back to Bristol for a visit.

“I can’t remember when I wasn’t talking about the Fowler family and Bristol,” she said. said.

Isaac Chapman Fowler was from Tazewell, Virginia, but moved to Goodson, which became Bristol, Virginia, soon after the end of the Civil War.

Donald Springer, Rita’s son, said the Mitorajs’ efforts have brought back some of Fowler’s vision for Bristol.

“Having done what they’ve done to this house, you’re now going to see other homes (restored.) It’s going to change the neighborhood,” he said. “You’re going to see other homes get developed, which is what I.C.



MARIA BASILEO | BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Rita Springer, 93, great-granddaughter of I.C. Fowler, sits in the home’s front parlor and tells stories about Fowler.



ONLINE

See more photos of the home and those involved in the restoration at **HeraldCourier.com**.

would have wanted more than anything.”

The house was built by Fowler in 1867. It is the oldest standing structure from the original town limits of Goodson, Virginia. The home has had many owners, but it eventually was donated to the Bristol Historical Association, which then sold it in 2009 to neighbor Scott Otis. After Otis spent years working on restorations, he sold the home to the Mitorajs.

Fowler purchased the Bristol News — in conjunction with his brother, Elbert — and became the editor. He also served as an elected official, as mayor of Goodson and at the state level for many years.

“(He) was very much involved in seeing Bristol succeed,” Tom Mitoraj said.

He died in 1905 and is buried in East Hill Cemetery in Bristol, Virginia.

Tom Mitoraj connected with Rita Springer last year when he was searching for any living relatives. When he came across her name, he

wasn’t sure if she was still alive.

After searching for her online, Tom Mitoraj exclaimed, “Lo and behold, she’s still around!”

Mitoraj also found some of Rita Springer’s art on a gallery’s website. Now one of Rita Springer’s paintings graces the home’s front parlor.

Fowler built houses for two of his daughters nearby, one of which belonged to Springer’s grandmother, who was also an artist.

“He was a remarkable human,” Donald Springer said of Fowler. “He really cared about people.”

Although they don’t plan to live there, the couple hopes the house will serve many purposes such as a meeting place for the historical association, visiting speakers and as an Airbnb.

Another special guest at today’s event is Peter Johnson, who is William Chapman’s first cousin three times removed. William Chapman’s father was Fowler’s great-grandfather.

Johnson complied the Fowler’s genealogical connections to other local families in a compilation he entitled, “Kissin’ Cousins,” as he can name at least four ways he is related to the Fowler family.

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