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THE VIRUS CRISIS

COVID-19 likely began its Florida spread in December

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It was March 1 when Florida announced its first two cases of the novel coronavirus, a 29-year-old Hillsborough County wom-

an who had traveled to Italy and a 63-year-old Manatee County man. But buried in data recently published by the Florida health department is an intriguing revelation: The

spread of COVID-19 in Florida likely began as early as December. State health officials have documented at least 170 COVID-19 patients reporting symptoms be-

tween Dec. 31, 2019, and February 29, according to a Miami Herald analysis of state health data. Of them, 40 percent had no apparent contact with someone else with the virus. The majority had not traveled. At least 26 people who contracted COVID-19 started showing symptoms in late December or Jan-

uary — and at least eight of them both had not traveled and did not have contact with another person infected by the virus. The trend continued into February. “That’s community spread,” said Eric Toner of the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security. “It’s invisible, it’s invisible, it’s

invisible, until it’s suddenly obvious.” Though the vast majority of the state’s cases have swamped South Florida, the data show the virus spread silently through Central and even North Florida during January, a time when testing for the

SEE VIRUS, 2A



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The Norwegian Escape cruise ship at PortMiami on Monday. Norwegian Cruise Line, founded in 1966, was Miami’s first cruise line.

Miami-Dade cities begin to confront the hits to budgets

■ Cities in Miami-Dade County are starting to consider how their budgets will be affected by the novel coronavirus pandemic as much of the economy remains shut down.

BY AARON LEIBOWITZ AND MARTIN VASSOLO
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Miami-Dade County may be inching toward reopening its economy, but no one knows when it will return to any semblance of normalcy. For the local officials overseeing municipal budgets, that’s a tricky place to be: There will surely be revenue shortfalls, many say, but it’s almost impossible to predict just how much will be lost.

For now, the best they can do is take an educated guess. Some local governments have already made painful decisions, laying off or furloughing workers and freezing spending. Others are holding their breath and waiting before cutting staff and services.

But the prospects aren’t pretty. On Monday, the financial services company Moody’s downgraded its national outlook for local governments from “stable” to “negative,” citing a growing expectation that the economic recovery process from COVID-19 will be slow.

Cities still have a few months to go before budget season, and most of their property tax revenues have already been collected for this fiscal year. But local

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Norwegian Cruise Line warns of possible bankruptcy

BY TAYLOR DOLVEN AND ROB WILE
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Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings said there is “substantial doubt” about the company’s ability to continue amid the COVID-19 pandemic and warned it may have to seek bankruptcy protection.

Despite that warning, Wall Street analysts say that as long as capital markets remain sturdy, the cruise line should still be able to weather the coronavirus pandemic.

The world’s third-largest cruise company, headquartered in Miami, said in a secu-

■ Miami-based Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings, the world’s third-largest cruise company, said in a securities filing that there is “substantial doubt” about its future as a business, citing revenue shortfalls from the COVID-19 pandemic.

rities filing Tuesday that it expects to report net losses for the quarter ending on March 31, 2020, and for the fiscal year ending Dec. 31, 2020. The company owns 28 ships across three cruise lines: Norwegian Cruise Line, Regent Seven Seas and Oceania Cruises.

“If we are not able to fulfill our liquidity needs through operating cash flows and/or borrowings under credit facilities or otherwise in the capital

markets, our business and financial condition could be adversely affected and it may be necessary for us to reorganize our company in its entirety, including through bankruptcy proceedings, and our shareholders may lose their investment in our ordinary shares,” the filing said.

Norwegian also said Tuesday that it had received a \$400 million infusion into its U.S. subsidiary, Norwegian Cruise Line Corporation Ltd.,

from Greenwich, Conn.-based private equity firm L Catterton. The company, among the largest consumer-focused private equity firms in the world, was formed through a partnership between private-equity firm Catterton, luxury retailer LVMH, and Groupe Arnault, the family holding company of Bernard Arnault. L Catterton, a major investor in the Miami Design District, also has investments in Equinox gyms, Anthony’s Coal Fired Pizza and StriVectin skin care.

The deal gives L Catterton a seat on Norwegian’s board of directors.

In an effort to bolster its

SEE NORWEGIAN, 5A

White House to phase out virus task force

■ Vice President Mike Pence said that the task force could wrap up its work by early June. The news comes as the rate of new infections continues to rise in much of the country.

BY NOAH WEILAND, MAGGIE HABERMAN AND DAVID E. SANGER
New York Times

WASHINGTON

Despite growing evidence that the pandemic is still raging, administration officials said Tuesday that they had made so much progress in bringing it under control that they planned to wind down the coronavirus task force in the

coming weeks and focus the White House on restarting the economy.

Vice President Mike Pence, who has led the task force for two months, said it would probably wrap up its work around the end of the May and shift management of the public health response back to the federal agencies whose work it was created to coordinate. Other administration offi-

cialists said that under plans still in discussion, the White House would consult with medical experts on a more informal basis and that Jared Kushner, the president’s son-in-law and senior adviser, would help oversee a group pushing for progress in developing a vaccine and treatments for the virus.

“It really is all a reflection of the tremendous progress we’ve made as a country,” Pence told reporters at the White House.

His comments came a day after the revelation of new

estimates that suggest deaths from the coronavirus, now above 70,000, could double by early August and that infection rates may rise sharply as businesses reopen. While the number of new cases logged daily in the New York City area is declining, new cases continue to grow across the rest of the United States.

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Business

Stocks end higher even after late-day stumble

Stocks closed broadly higher on Wall Street on Tuesday as more countries relaxed restrictions on businesses, raising hopes for a recovery from the historic plunge that is sweeping the global economy. The S&P 500 rose 0.9% after losing about half of its early gains in a late-afternoon burst of selling. Technology and healthcare stocks accounted for much of the gains, which followed a strong showing in overseas markets.

Investors are increasingly cautiously optimistic that the gradual reopening of some businesses will begin to turn around the economy.

In California, some retail businesses could begin serving customers again as early as Friday, under some restrictions. Many European countries have also begun relaxing strict orders meant to slow the spread of the coronavirus outbreak. In Asia, the first pitches of the South Korean baseball season thwacked into catchers' mitts, albeit in stadiums with no fans in attendance.

Expectations for stronger demand for oil as more businesses get the green light to open helped drive crude oil prices sharply higher, extending its mini-rally after falling to record lows last month.

"It's investors getting a little bit ahead of themselves," said Willie Delwiche, investment strategist at Baird. "Maybe, it's a sense of relief that we've made it this far and there's some sort of a path forward, even if it's not real clear."

Delwiche noted that questions remain about at what pace will consumers venture out of their homes and spend money as shuttered businesses reopen.

"That's the big unknown right now," he said.

The S&P 500 gained 25.70 points to 2,868.44. The Dow Jones Industrial Average rose 133.33 (0.6%) to 23,883.09. The Nasdaq climbed 98.41 (1.1%) to 8,809.12. Small stocks in the Russell 2000 index were doing even better than their larger rivals for much of the day, before shedding some of their gains by late afternoon. The Russell 2000 rose 9.54 (0.8%) to 1,273.51.

— ASSOCIATED PRESS

Bartender sues DeSantis for excluding Palm Beach from reopening order

Restaurants and retailers across the state received the governor's blessing to reopen Monday, as long as they operate at 25% capacity and keep tables six feet apart.

But Gov. Ron DeSantis' executive order, released last Wednesday, excludes Palm Beach, Broward or Miami-Dade counties, which have most of the state's cases of COVID-19, the highly infectious disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

Debra Henry, a 40-year South Florida restaurant industry veteran, is suing DeSantis over the order, which she calls an unfair attempt to reopen some businesses in the state but not others.

The complaint, filed in federal district court the day the order was released, says the order violates Henry's constitutional rights, as it "arbitrarily" allows some businesses to remain open. It says the order is "unconstitutional on its face" and will disparately affect some businesses but not others.

Henry, 61, worked as a bartender at Pit Row Bar & Grille in Palm Springs and as a server at a Buffalo Wild Wings in West Palm Beach, but lost both jobs in mid-March as businesses shuttered to slow the spread of COVID-19.

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Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden has a list of new rules to protect guests. Fairchild is only allowing garden access to members before it eventually opens up to everyone; no word on when that will happen.

Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden is reopening today

BY CONNIE OGLE
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Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden is reopening after shutting down for coronavirus quarantine, with new social-distancing strategies in place — and new rules about who's allowed in.

The 83-acre garden in Coral Gables reopens today, but this is not the same old Fairchild.

First of all, you can't just walk up and buy a ticket like you did in olden times; you buy a ticket online. Visits are limited to two-hour blocks starting at 10 a.m., noon and 2 p.m. Only 100 visitors are allowed in at a time, and all visitors

must wear a mask (don't be like those people in South Pointe Park).

Seniors and others who identify as vulnerable can reserve spots during the special early hours from 7-9 a.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

The two-mile route around the garden will be one-way, and the butterfly gardens will remain closed,

as will the cafés, picnic areas and other indoor exhibits. Prepare to walk, too — the trams won't be running — and many seating areas are gone. Happily, some restrooms will be open, with attendants making sure people go in one at a time or with their quarantine group.

At this time, Fairchild is only allowing garden access to members before it eventually opens up to everyone; no word on when that will happen. This is a benefit to members, says Chief Operating Officer Nannette Zapata, adding that easing into opening is easier with people familiar with the gardens.

But make no mistake: Visitors will need to follow the rules or the garden will shut down again, she says. "If rules are broken, if we

If you go

● **Where:** 10901 Old Cutler Rd, Coral Gables

● **Hours:** Daily 10 a.m.-4 p.m.

● **Ticket reservations (for members only at this time):** Available online only at www.FairchildGarden.org

● **Become a member:** www.fairchildgarden.org/support-join/join-or-renew

find we have to police too heavily and remind people over and over and they're not wearing masks, we're going to shut it down," she says. "People have to be responsible for their actions."

The new hours and rules aren't the garden's first adjustment to the coronavirus quarantine. Last month, it held its popular annual spring plant sale online and delivered purchases to buyers' homes. The sale was so successful, Zapata says, the garden restocked four times, and there are still plants for sale on the website.

Fairchild is also selling fruit on its website — after all, it's almost mango season — and will ship nationwide. It has also started a virtual-wedding program where couples can marry at the garden and guests can attend virtually.

Zapata hopes the reopening is as successful as the garden's other quarantine programs — and she thinks a walk in the garden can be beneficial.

"There are scientific benefits to being outdoors," she says. "Miami is so beautiful this time of year. The weather is stunning. I think people are really craving to be outdoors."

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Whenever S. Fla. malls reopen, it will be a different world

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With varying restrictions in place, shopping malls have begun reopening in many places across America amid a still-raging coronavirus pandemic — though not yet in South Florida.

When they might reopen remains unclear. But when South Florida's ever-popular malls — including some of the country's largest — throw open their doors, shoppers who venture in will be greeted by a workforce sporting the latest in today's mandatory retail accessory: a mask. So will the sales staff who check them out, most from behind plexiglass partitions that have become part of the new everyday landscape at "essential" retailers such as grocers and drug stores.

Retail giant Macy's, for instance, has announced it is requiring all staff to wear masks. At the 68 stores it has opened around the country, Macy's is also imposing wellness checks at the start of shifts, enforcing social distancing for shoppers and workers, installing plastic shields at checkout, improving ventilation and conducting more intense and frequent cleaning and sanitizing of stores. Masks for shoppers are optional.

Makeup-testing samplers and perfume-spraying are for now a thing of the past, at least at Macy's. Makeup demonstrations will happen on paper — not on a customer's face, Macy's says.

Outside of South Florida, shoppers seeking relief from home quarantines trickled into reopened

Florida malls, though there seemed to be no large surge. Some were deflated to find many anchor stores and national retailers remained dark. And not all malls reopened. Some operators said they were taking it slowly as they figured out how to comply with new rules limiting capacity to 25% of normal.

"We were desperate to go shopping again and we're quite disappointed, actually, because there's hardly any stores open," Andrea Nommik told the Tampa Bay Times on Monday as she and friend Nicki Mardsen, toting their own masks, hand sanitizer and wipes, visited the Tyrone Square Mall in St. Petersburg.

Gov. Ron DeSantis lifted a shutdown order for most retail businesses starting on Monday, with the exception of hair and nail salons throughout the state including the Florida Keys. But DeSantis exempted Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties, the epicenter of the epidemic in the state, allowing them to set their own timetables.

South Florida mall operators are now busy making preparations for the day when they do receive clearance to reopen — with many assuming they'll get a green light sometime this month.

"While a lot remains uncertain, retail will certainly look different in the near term as we continue to adjust to new protocols and safeguards to ensure the health of our guests and employees," said David Martin, vice president of retail at Brickell City Centre, in an email.

In half a dozen other states where governors also eased shutdown orders, shoppers began returning to mall shops that resumed



CARL JUSTE cjuste@miamiherald.com, file

Bal Harbour Shops will hire about 14 additional employees to clean the mall throughout the day. South Florida mall operators will likely require masks and wellness checks for staff.

in-store sales during the past several days.

That's despite criticism from some public-health experts, who say the reopenings in Florida and elsewhere are coming too early. They note that it's not yet clear what course the pandemic is taking across the United States. On Monday, new estimates from two models, including the University of Washington model used by the White House, sharply raised projections of its spread, citing the lifting of social-distancing measures in many states.

And according to a Washington Post-University of Maryland poll released Tuesday, 67% of those surveyed say they would be uncomfortable shopping at a retail clothing store, with 78% saying they would be uncomfortable eating at a restaurant. People in states with looser restrictions report similar levels of discomfort as those in states with stricter rules, the Post reported.

Simon Property Group, the nation's largest mall operator, has reopened three dozen shopping centers and planned to open the doors to 49 more across 10 states on Mon-

day, though none in South Florida. The reopening so far has proven uneven; while some malls saw crowds of shoppers, some reopened stores saw only light foot traffic, according to news reports.

The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the retail implosion that has been building for years. Monday, J. Crew announced it has filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, and analysts widely predict that Neiman-Marcus — which has signature stores in Merrick Park and Bal Harbour Shops along with several discount Last Call outlets — will follow suit.

But prior to COVID-19, retail had remained stronger in South Florida than in most other parts of the country, partly due to foreign shoppers. With uncertainty around travel, local retail might well suffer.

Locally, mall managers — including those at Bal Harbour Shops, Brickell City Centre and Dolphin Mall — anticipate a gradual reopening that could ramp up to an all-operations go by June, though the buying experience will be far from business as usual for both shoppers and retail workers.

Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez has not yet signaled when he might lift closure orders, though he has said he hoped this week to finalize rules for reopening restaurants, offices, stores and other businesses in the county. Cities can institute stricter rules than the county if they so choose.

Citing potential public hesitation, Miami-Dade mall managers say they don't expect throngs of shoppers right away when they do reopen for business.

"The pace at which our operations will return to normal will depend entirely on the willingness of the public to engage in activities outside of the home. We anticipate this readiness may return slowly but will steadily ramp up over many weeks unless there are extenuating circumstances," said Maria Mainville, spokeswoman for Dolphin Mall, in an email.

Brickell City Centre will leave the decision of when to reopen to 100-plus tenants once they're cleared to do so, said Martin, the Brickell vice president of retail. Brands include Saks Fifth Avenue, Apple and

SEE MALLS, 21A