

WEEKEND WAVE

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Friday Economic Roundup

University seeks to meet community needs

By ANNE EASKER Charlotte Sun Staff Writer

As Western Michigan University gets closer to operating its aviation program at the Punta Gorda Airport, the research university says it is looking for more ways to integrate into Charlotte County and fulfill the needs of the aging population.

WMU officials spoke to the Enterprise Charlotte Economic Council's luncheon Thursday.

The flight school's first class will begin on Aug. 24 of next year with 50 students. Captain Dave Powell, Dean of the College of Aviation, expects the program to grow in the future to at least the size of its program in Michigan, which has 500 students.

According to Powell, there is a huge need for commercial pilots both nationally and internationally. Aviation is one of the top three industries for projected growth in Florida, and there is currently no public university aviation program. As baby boomer pilots retire and vacancies increase, aerospace company Boeing estimates there will be a need for a million commercial pilots and maintenance technicians by 2023.

"Airplanes are parked around the United States right now because of a shortage of pilots," Powell said. "Two years from now, airplanes will be parked because of a shortage of mechanics."

Powell said in the past, many pilots were trained in the military, but now, fewer are being trained there, and half of them are flying drones, never actually sitting in the cockpit of a plane. Colleges and universities are the new field for pilot training, but Florida currently has no public university with an aviation program.

WMU expects to fly about eight planes, equipped with the newest technology.

"We're not going to teach history; we're going to teach the future," Powell said.

Dawn Gaymer, associate provost for WMU's Extended University Programs, said that as WMU started planning a move to Florida, she started getting emails from people concerned about the university's effect on the region, and imagined her own father, who owned a house in Punta Gorda, would have felt the same way.

"I knew my father would have said, 'Why would I want a bunch of young people moving here?'" Gaymer said. "So we started looking at, what can we offer that they can really use?"

The answer was health and wellness services. The university is looking at bringing in behavioral science programs, including gerontology and music therapy, with a focus on positive aging.

WMU already has physician assistants who have completed training rotations in Charlotte County and is planning to have a class of 80 physician assistant students in January 2018. The university plans to grow its existing partnerships and form new ones with area hospitals and clinics, harnessing the power of a research university to serve Charlotte County's aging population. While students receive clinical education and training, residents will receive services for free.

Environmental opportunities also abound for the university.

Carla Koretsky, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and Professor of Geosciences, is hoping to bring field camps to the area, so students can gain firsthand experience studying freshwater contaminants, flooding, and well-drilling - gaining the skills they will need as environmental consultants. Those types of opportunities are limited in Michigan due to the weather.

Babcock Ranch President Rick Severance, in attendance at the meeting, expressed interest in partnering with WMU to create a research hub at Babcock, the new development growing in southern Charlotte County.

WMU will also bring its Supply Chain Management program, offering standalone classes for any company or individual seeking additional training in areas like negotiation, cost analysis and business intelligence. A certificate will be available for students who take five of these classes.

As new students and faculty come to the area, fueling the economy, Gaymer said the university will need more long-term housing solutions, infrastructure and year-round activities to support them.

The university is still awaiting regional accreditation but will be kicking off its campus presence at Florida Southwestern State College on Oct. 18.

Million a Year Passengers & August 2016 Passenger Traffic is up 35.7 %

Punta Gorda, FL - The Charlotte County Airport Authority announced for the first time ever the rolling 12-month passenger total has exceeded a million passengers. The total passenger count for the twelve months ending August 31 is 1,014,550. The Punta Gorda Airport passenger count for August, 2016 was 81,800. This is a **35.7% increase** in passenger traffic for August, 2016 compared with August, 2015 (60,240) passengers).

In August, there were 42,206 boarding passengers and 39,594 arriving passengers. This is the 35th month in a row that the Airport has seen an increase in passenger traffic in year over year monthly traffic.

Gary Quill, Director of the Charlotte County Airport Authority, stated "The growth of Punta Gorda Airport has been incredible. Nine years ago we did not have airline service. Today we have airline service to thirty-four cities! We are happy to have a such a positive impact on the community."

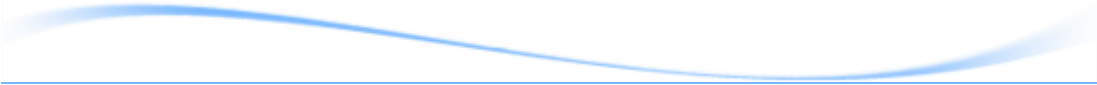
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Frontier Airlines has service to Chicago O'Hare Airport, Trenton, New Jersey and Philadelphia International Airport.


The Charlotte County Airport Authority owns and operates the Punta Gorda Airport located at 28000 Airport Road in Punta Gorda, Florida.



FLORIDA ECONOMIC NEWS

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 - Florida added 15,200 private sector jobs in August ([Florida Trend](#))
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ENTREPRENEUR NEWS

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