



CHARLOTTE COUNTY
Economic Development

WEEKEND WAVE

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Friday Economic Roundup

WMU to share scientific expertise with Charlotte

By GARY ROBERTS STAFF WRITER Charlotte Sun

MURDOCK - Western Michigan University officials are in town this week, touring the county and trumpeting the third academic program being introduced to the area.

In discussing the nation's first freshwater science and sustainability program at Tuesday's county workshop, WMU and Charlotte officials found common ground in how the research university can apply its expertise to problems found here.

"WMU's programs are extremely compatible to southwestern Florida's needs and we are eager to work with Charlotte County and implement our sustainability programs," said Ed Martini, WMU's Extended University Program's associate dean. "Our faculty will work directly with students to conduct research and that will benefit the community and create sustainable practices."

WMU's aviation program, the third largest in the U.S., broke ground for the burgeoning partnership with Florida SouthWestern State College and county government. The research university received approval from Florida to operate in the state last May and will begin offering its first classes in the fall of 2017, with about 50 students flying out of Punta Gorda Airport.

Meanwhile, a class of physician assistants is likely to begin in January, with additional

health and environmental science programs to follow. FSW students also will have access to these academic programs and, particularly, graduate-level coursework previously not available.

"We're in full-on student recruitment mode," said Lucienne Pears, county economic development director.

In preparing to bring these academic programs to the area, Martini and his WMU colleagues have a whirlwind schedule ahead to better acquaint themselves with their new satellite campus surroundings.

During their brief stay, WMU officials will visit local parks that will accommodate future field research, a University of Florida extension campus in Immokalee to learn about water farming and Charlotte County Utilities to talk about its wastewater expansion project.

Martini explained that WMU will engage with the community to share its expertise on all kinds of environmental issues.

"There are lots of opportunities for research and collaboration," Martini said. "We're interested in solving problems."

At Tuesday's workshop, Mohamed Sultan, chair of WMU's geoscience program, presented his recent research on algae blooms that have had such a huge effect on Florida in recent years. Through this work, they were able to develop a statistical model that predicts where and when future algae growth will occur.

This last topic touched a nerve with county commissioners, who were immediately reminded of the costly dredging of Sunshine Lake to remove a smothering algae mat caused by nutrient overload.

"We had an unheard of algae bloom a few years ago," Commissioner Ken Doherty said. "That's a real big issue."

Commissioner Chris Constance then brought up another recent environmental problem of potentially far-reaching consequences, hoping that WMU may be able to help. In August, a sinkhole opened under large stacks of gypsum at the Mosaic phosphate fertilizer manufacturing operation in Polk County. Mosaic reported that hundreds of millions of gallons of contaminated water drained into the aquifer and is now preparing to seal off the sinkhole.

WMU could provide invaluable support in studying and monitoring these and other environmental matters, he said.

"We can't think of a better partner than Western Michigan to keep it all homegrown," he said.

Still another benefit derived from WMU expanding into Charlotte, separate from the environment, will be a projected boost in the economy. With the county currently lacking a skilled workforce, WMU can assist in training new pilots, aviation mechanics and physician assistants needed for the area's economic development.

Florida's Commission for Independent Education approved two provisional licenses for WMU to offer academic programs in Florida earlier this year. Regional accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission is still pending. Once the final approval is obtained, WMU and FSW will be able to offer the degree programs.

The Punta Gorda Airport Announces New Allegiant Airline Service to Dayton, Ohio

PUNTA GORDA, FL - Allegiant Airlines announces nonstop jet service to Dayton, Ohio began November 17, 2016. Check Allegiantair.com for schedule and fares.

With this addition of Dayton, Allegiant now has nonstop service to **thirty-one cities** from the Punta Gorda Airport (PGD).

"We're elated Allegiant is expanding their services to the Punta Gorda Airport," said James Parish, Punta Gorda Airport president and CEO. "This new Dayton service allows nonstop flights at low fares for both residents, as well as vacationing Dayton travelers - and it's great timing for the upcoming holiday season."

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