



CHARLOTTE COUNTY
Economic Development

WEEKEND WAVE

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Friday Economic Roundup

Charlotte County's 'Future is Now'

By **GARY ROBERTS** Staff Writer Charlotte Sun

PUNTA GORDA - Speaking to hundreds at the April groundbreaking of Babcock Ranch, the nation's first solar-powered city, developer Syd Kitson welcomed the excited throng through a door into the future. Beneath a clear blue sky and a boundless horizon, Kitson talked about a vision, 10 years in the making, that fuses home construction and core values to strengthen family, conserve energy and protect the environment.

"Everything we're designing at Babcock Ranch, we're thinking about the environment," he said. "That legacy is very, very important to us."

On Friday, Rick Severance, president of Babcock Ranch, offered an update on the sprawling, 10,000-acre community at an event hosted by the Urban Land Institute-Southwest Florida District Council. The session, attended by a packed room of interested citizens and stakeholders at the Event Center, also featured the Murdock Village developer in a program entitled "Charlotte County Change Agents: The Future is Now."

Together, these large-scale projects are ushering in large, mixed use projects that are truly changing Charlotte's landscape, and potential.

In following up on Kitson's comments, presented in a video, Severance noted that a lot has since happened in Babcock Ranch, located east of Punta Gorda at the Charlotte and Lee county line.

The ongoing initial development phase is introducing the first of what eventually will be up to 20,000 housing units. With 16 different models under construction, residential sales

will kick off next month for 1,100 residences, starting at \$179,000 for villas and the low-\$300,000s for single family.

Simultaneously taking shape is the downtown district, with a wellness center, general store, lakeside restaurant and outdoor outfitter providing residents and visitors outdoorsy equipment to tour around multiple lakes and a 3.5-mile trail system.

A charter neighborhood school, set to open next year, already has 45 students since enrollment began Thanksgiving week. And it will all be run by a 440-acre solar power plant.

"We're powered by the sun, but we're energized by you," Severance told the crowd. "Only people generate community. Only people give ownership to their place."

Another major project reborn after a long recession is Murdock Village. Exactly two weeks ago, the Private Equity Group of Fort Myers signed a contract with Charlotte County to purchase 452 acres.

Cracking open the door to negotiations, PEG President Don Schrottenboer explained that it took three tries for his company to buy a portion of Murdock Village because the county had previously insisted on selling all the land at once for a larger sum.

But after adopting a long-range approach based on projected revenues after the land is developed, county officials accepted the \$11.6 million offer, which will then be returned to PEG after it constructs a four-lane boulevard with "public infrastructure" on 75 acres, and then conveys the land back to Charlotte. The county spent \$93 million a dozen years ago to acquire the still-vacant parcel and continues to make payments.

"They wanted to recoup their debt upfront," he said. "No one's going to do that. It's just impossible."

Looking ahead, Schrottenboer sees only potential, envisioning 2,400 residential units, 200,000 square feet of commercial and a 150-key hotel growing up around Charlotte County North Regional Park.

"It's a great in-fill site," he said. "There's an inherent amenity already built into this project that needs to be taken advantage of. We also have determined there is a tremendous need for a hotel."

Although it may take up to three years for the property to sprout homes, there could be enough tax revenue produced to pay back the county debt within 15 years, he added.

Charlotte Economic Development Director Lucienne Pears also took to the podium, heralding the new projects, while preparing for more to follow. Her office has been actively grooming the 4,000-acre Punta Gorda Interstate Airport Park to become the next center for development, primarily industrial.

By assembling certified sites and pre-permitted spec building plans, the county seeks to attract targeted industries that will diversify and bolster the area's economic base. And the new alliance with Western Michigan University will train the skilled workers needed for incoming businesses.

"We are trying to develop a pipeline for our workforce," she said.

Murdock Village and Babcock Ranch also will help overcome another barrier to growth by providing affordable workforce housing.

In a second video, Dawn Gaymer, WMU associate provost for Extended University Programs, touted her research university for offering academic training in wellness and geriatrics, serving the second oldest county in the country, and in aviation, already a \$4 billion industry in Florida.

And there are more than 5,000 WMU alumni living between Tampa and Naples, she said.

"We do feel like we belong," Gaymer said.

Representatives from the Enterprise Charlotte Economic Council, a private group that advocates for economic development, were on hand as well. In response to an audience question about why the City Marketplace property in the center of downtown Punta Gorda has remained empty since Hurricane Charley, ECEC President Rob Humpel echoed the need for a larger population.

"I've been involved with three different projects that looked at that property. The reality is that without more people coming here, there's not going to be the demand for restaurants, office space and multifamily housing," Humpel said. "The payback period on that property is so long that no investor or developer is going to put money into it that is required to develop that whole piece."

Todd Rebol pointed to the positive sign that more than 1,000 single-family building permits were issued in Charlotte County during fiscal year 2016, echoing that more residents are needed to absorb these homes and fuel the economy. And more jobs are needed to keep young people here, he said.

The voter-approved 1 percent sales tax, which ECEC earnestly supported, is drawing families to the area by adding park facilities and a new library, he said.

"I think we have to build on those assets," Rebol said.

Venice may get two new hospitals

By **BOB MUDGE** Staff Writer Charlotte Sun

Venice Regional Bayfront Health (and Sarasota Memorial Hospital) received an early Christmas present Friday in the form of state approval for each to build a new hospital in the Venice area.

"We're certainly happy about that," VRBH CEO John McLain said of the good news for his facility.

"We're ecstatic," SMH CEO David Verinder said, calling an acute-care hospital the "missing link" in the services SMH provides in South County.

While news of both SMH and VRBH's Certificate of Need approval was a major win for the Venice community, it was a big setback for North Port, a growing city that has struggled to attract a critical care hospital for years.

Taking into consideration a potentially lengthy CoN application process plus the time to design and build a hospital, North Port may be at least six years away from securing a full-scale facility, said Sam George, chairman of the nonprofit group, Community Health Action Team.

And with the city's rapid growth, it's entirely possible North Port could have 100,000 residents but lack a hospital.

"I'm disappointed in Agency for Health Care Administration. With all the noise we made, they should know we're interested in a hospital, especially with the population we have," said George, whose group has been fighting to get a hospital in North Port for years.

"We're still underserved by both Sarasota Memorial and AHCA."

Vanessa Carusone, recently re-elected to North Port City Commission after a six-year hiatus, says the city might not appeal the process at this time.

"I'm not sure it's prudent for the new commission to appeal," she said. "I'm not sure that would be enough standing."

While disappointed in the outcome, Carusone added that an appeal would cost unnecessary taxpayer money by involving lawyers. She said the city should voice its disapproval in another fashion, although she didn't say how.

"It will be what it will be," Carusone said.

George, though, says an appeal is necessary and a good way for the new commissioners to "Get their feet wet." Two of the four commissioners are fresh faces and new to politics and Carusone is back on the board after serving consecutive terms from 2002-2010.

"They need to have that fire in them, especially if AHCA thinks it's OK to drive 30 to 40 minutes to get to the hospital," he said. "I hope they see this and really get proactive."

CHAT remains in active discussions with both Lee Memorial Hospital and VRBH in hopes of luring one - or both - to the city. The likely scenario, George says, would be either Lee or Bayfront sponsoring a multipurpose medical village, which would be located in West Villages or along Toledo Blade Boulevard.

"It won't be a critical care facility, but it will help serve the community and help bring in more physicians," George said.

While there are glimpses of hope, George says AHCA's decision to approve SMH and Venice Bayfront's applications will make it "much harder" to get anything accomplished.

"I'm disappointed in AHCA, our city commission and city manager," he said. "CHAT seemed to drag this by ourselves without much help from the city."

But because the approvals are only a preliminary decision by the AHCA, both administrators now have to wait to see if a Grinch comes along to try to take their gift away via an administrative challenge.

Each new Venice facility filed a certificate of need application with AHCA in October.

VRBH sought permission to build a 210-bed replacement facility just outside the city limits, south of East Venice Avenue and east of the Jacaranda roundabout. SMH wanted approval for 20 new beds and the transfer of 90 beds from its Sarasota campus to a new hospital to be built on 65 acres it owns at the southeast corner of Laurel and Pinebrook roads in the city.

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