



CHARLOTTE COUNTY
Economic Development

WEEKEND WAVE

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Friday Economic Roundup

AREA NEWS

County offers plans for Jones Loop rest area

By GARY ROBERTS STAFF WRITER CHARLOTTE SUN

EAST OF PUNTA GORDA - Charlotte County has sent a letter to the state expressing interest in taking over the Jones Loop Road rest area when it closes in January. As a requirement to receiving the property free of charge, the county must provide a public use for

the 20-acre site.

After reading about state plans to shut down the Jones Loop rest stop due to a lack of visitors, county officials are discussing its potential as a gateway to the community - from Interstate 75 and Punta Gorda Airport.

"It's important for us to take advantage of this really great opportunity," Commissioner Chris Constance said.

In bandying about possible uses for the site, officials have come up with several options, including an ecotourism and visitors center complete with canoeing and kayaking on nearby Alligator Creek, a venue to host outdoor festivals as well as other possibilities.

"Here's the interesting thing - 750 visitors a day is not enough for them, it's fantastic for Charlotte County," Constance said. "It is a great introductory location for us."

Constance also talked about a possible public-private partnership to develop the land, with the county retaining ownership of the property. Commissioner Bill Truex has inspected the facility and walked the site, suggesting a combination rest stop and tourist interpretive center highlighting the natural wonders of the area.

Tom Patton, county economic development director, also endorses the idea of an interpretive center, citing a similar project he helped build in Polk County.

"It is really cool," Patton said. "It shows the culture of the community, and to bring people off the highway into Charlotte County is a real challenge."

To staff such a center, the tourism department could have some offices out there as well to help folks plan their trips around town, he added.

Meanwhile, Commissioner Tricia Duffy has been hesitant about the county getting involved, noting that any operational plan would include ongoing maintenance costs.

The Florida Department of Transportation is scheduled to close the Jones Loop Road rest area east of I-75 at exit 161 in January. An FDOT spokesman said motorists prefer using other locations for their rest stops, such as restaurants and convenience stores.

The site includes three buildings, including restrooms and a convenience kiosk, plus about 100 parking spaces.

In addition, there are nine covered picnic shelters with a road and parking spaces immediately behind them, where vendors can load and unload their merchandise at future festival events, said Lorah Steiner, Charlotte County director of tourism development.

Steiner said a tourism center located on-site would give the area some much needed visibility from I-75.

"We would love to have a presence on the highway," she said. "You don't even know Charlotte County is here when driving by."

The location also would capture traffic coming from the airport, making it a true entryway into Charlotte County, Steiner said.

The state has vowed to leave standing or demolish any or all of the structures on the property, depending on the preference of the county, which is the governmental body with the first option on the property. FDOT will retain five acres of the site for stormwater retention when I-75 is widened, reducing usable space to about 15 acres.

A next step for the county is a cost analysis for various proposed uses, then determine the highest and best use for the property, she said. The state is expected to make its decision in February or March.

If the county does not use the land for a public purpose, the state could then sell the property for commercial development.

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