



CHARLOTTE COUNTY
Economic Development

WEEKEND WAVE

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Friday Economic Roundup

AREA NEWS

Big builders take aim at Charlotte

By BRIAN GLEESON EDITORIAL PAGE EDITOR CHARLOTTE SUN

With three recent sales totaling 320 acres, Ashley Bloom of real estate broker Sperry Van Ness' Sarasota office foresees a busy 2015 in the vacant residential real estate market.

"We're starting to see the regional and national homebuilders that had previously stayed away from Charlotte County get interested in the 'A-located' sites in county. Three to six months ago, you couldn't even get them to look in Charlotte County," Bloom said.

The most recent transaction was for a 25-acre parcel east of Punta Gorda to JJ & RG Properties LLC for \$260,000. Bloom said the property likely will be subdivided into home sites in the upscale area along Riverside Drive, east of Punta Gorda. The company is the real estate investment vehicle of Jeremy Jones and Ron Greenland, who own dozens of single-

family residential properties throughout the county. The sellers were the privately held private equity firm, Colony Capital.

Another recent transaction involved a 126-acre tract along State Road 776, west of Charlotte Sports Park, that sold for \$1.7 million. Bloom said the new owners, Lux Biscayne Properties LLC, will seek a density change for what will be a new gated community. He added that the market for such homes is being driven by expected demand from retiring baby boomers.

One of the most popular types of home styles being sought is the duplex, in communities with homeowners associations that handle landscaping chores. The price range of homes in Charlotte is starting to drive interest - single-family permits were up 37 percent this year - after several years in which builders passed over the county for Sarasota, Lee and Collier counties.

"It provides a nice, affordable living community, as compared to a Naples or Sarasota," Bloom said of Charlotte County's price range.

Increasingly, those homebuyers are not having to deal with mortgage lenders. Bloom said regional and national builders are reporting "all-cash sales in more than 60 percent of the transactions."

Bloom and his colleagues have a number of deals close to closing, including the relaunch of a development east of Punta Gorda that was stalled by the housing bust and subsequent recession. He declined to name the project.

"What I have in the pipeline are several opportunities we're hopeful to close in the first quarter of next year, (including) one of the largest national home builders to do a gated community," Bloom said. "All the data and market indicators we are tracking are pointing to the Gulf Coast as a rapidly improving market. From what we are experiencing, especially in Charlotte County, we believe the market is in the initial stages of an upward trajectory of growth. We anticipate this growth to continue during 2015."

While 2014 saw a wave of investment in Charlotte County's typical quarter-acre platted lots, Bloom said the challenges of assembling numerous parcels to develop preclude large builders from bothering to target those properties. With the recession washing out most of the small builders in the area, the bulk of the homes built in 2015 and beyond will continue to be within new and existing gated communities.

State board OKs Babcock deal

By BRENDA BARBOSA STAFF WRITER CHARLOTTE SUN

EAST OF PUNTA GORDA - The Florida Public Service Commission has signed off on a deal that will allow Florida Power & Light to be the sole power utility to serve the sprawling Babcock Ranch Community.

This week's decision is the latest on the long bureaucratic path for the Babcock Ranch Community and the planned 19,000 homes to be developed on roughly 18,000 acres of property next to the Babcock Ranch Preserve.

The next phase of development involves detailed plan approval from various state and local regulatory agencies, said Tom Danahy, president of Kitson Babcock, a subsidiary of Babcock Ranch Community's parent company, Kitson & Partners.

At the heart of owner-developer Syd Kitson's energy-efficient dream: a sustainable community for some 50,000 people, complete with smart homes, smart grids, charging stations for smart cars, and large arrays of solar panels.

The development also would include 6 million square feet of office and retail space, along with hotels and a golf course.

In 2006, Kitson made national headlines with the purchase of the 91,000-acre Babcock Ranch wildlife preserve, a pristine stretch of land that covers an area three times the size of San Francisco.

That same year, he signed an agreement with then-Florida Gov. Jeb Bush to sell nearly 74,000 of Babcock's acres to the state for \$350 million - Florida's largest single land deal in history. Start of construction will depend on when the project can clear the various government hurdles.

Authority keeps airport construction on pace

By ADAM KREGER STAFF WRITER CHARLOTTE SUN

PUNTA GORDA - The Charlotte County Airport Authority made some moves on Christmas Eve to keep a massive terminal expansion project on schedule, and to prepare for a future airfield project.

Construction began recently on an \$8 million terminal at the rapidly growing Punta Gorda Airport that will be significantly larger than the existing Bailey Terminal. During an emergency meeting Wednesday, the authority unanimously approved the shuffling of some funds to ensure terminal construction won't have to be halted.

About \$1.2 million in state money will be pulled from a land-acquisition project and put toward finishing the terminal. The borrowed money from the land-acquisition project will be reimbursed later.

"Our priority right now is finishing the terminal," said authority Executive Director Gary Quill.

An emergency meeting was called to pass the resolution because the authority's next regular meeting isn't until the end of January, and the Florida Department of Transportation needed certain documentation before that.

Also during Wednesday's meeting, the authority unanimously approved a study so some wetlands near the airport could be removed, since they are in the way of a project aiming to build taxiways.

URS Corporation - an engineering and design company - will conduct the \$24,000 study to prove two acres of wetlands could be relocated without issue. The state would then review the study and decide whether to give the green light to build taxiways where the wetlands are.

"We're in the process of putting in an instrument landing system," said authority member Rob Hancik. "Basically what that does is it helps pilots fly more precise courses because of landing weather minimums and all this technical stuff. When you put in an instrument landing system, you have to have a parallel taxiway with it."

Taxiways run alongside runways and allow airplanes to move around the airfield more efficiently. Construction on the taxiways at the Punta Gorda Airport could begin in the summer and will take about six months to finish, Quill said. Early cost estimates are upward of \$2.5 million.

The terminal project is on pace to be completed by March 2016.

Tourism boom impacting area 127 million tourists projected for Florida by 2020

By ALLISON SHIRK STAFF WRITER CHARLOTTE SUN

Rentals are booked, events are sold out and tourist revenues are at all-time highs in the Southwest corner of the state, which local and regional tourism experts say quickly is becoming one of the most sought-out travel destinations in Florida.

"This area has been a sleeping giant," Marg Johnston, manager of Sunshine Vacation Rentals, said. "People are all heading to one place."

That "place" reaches across Sarasota, Charlotte and DeSoto counties - a region that brought in its share of more than 93 million tourists to Florida in 2013. Those tourists spent more than \$76 billion, according to Visit Florida, the state's official tourism marketing corporation.

Area tourism officials and others gathered recently for a Sun Roundtable discussion on tourism and its impact locally.

Tourists generated 23 percent of the state's sales tax revenue, and employed nearly 1.1 million Floridians last year, and experts are saying the Southwest region of the state is contributing greatly to this growth - thanks, in part, to marketing efforts by Charlotte and Sarasota county tourism programs.

"We need to know who we are, know our product and protect it at all costs," said Lorah Steiner, director of tourism development for Charlotte County.

Visitors to the county are up 18.37 percent from the 2013-14 fiscal year already, according to Steiner. She said that in September, there were 34.3 percent more visitors than September 2013, and in October, there were 20 percent more visitors than the previous October. Charlotte reported that approximately 292,400 people visited the county from January to September of this year, and that contributed more than \$373,230,600 to the

local economy.

Visit Sarasota County reported approximately 977,200 tourists came to the county in the 2013-14 fiscal year, ending Sept. 30, which contributed more than \$1.6 billion to the community. It also reported tourist numbers have increased by 13 percent this year, over the same October-to-December time period of last year.

Steiner said creating a "brand identity" has been the challenge for Charlotte County.

With an operating budget of \$1.2 million for the 2014-15 fiscal year, the county will be able to expand projects it already has begun, like refocusing tourism campaigns for print and digital outlets.

"Charlotte Harbor doesn't resonate with Midwesterners," Steiner said. "We have had to establish cities, like Punta Gorda and Englewood, as places for people to visit."

The Charlotte County identity also has added sports to the list of attractions for the area. According to the Charlotte Harbor Visitor & Convention Bureau, the 2014 Snowbird Baseball Classic in February and March at various county ballparks generated approximately \$6 million for the local economy.

Virginia Haley, president of Visit Sarasota County, said money from the annual baseball tournament trickles into Sarasota, as well. Sports is a market into which Sarasota County has tapped, to keep visitors coming in time periods when tourism numbers are usually low.

"We have more money to get into the marketplace and tell the 'Sarasota Story,'" Haley said. "Then we add in things, like sports."

Haley said she has an operating budget of more than \$5 million for the 2014-15 fiscal year. She said adding sports tournaments has helped to bring in visitors and tourism dollars.

For example, Haley said the first week of December is normally a "dead week" for tourism. Now, there are soccer tournaments that bring in extra revenue and visitors.

It's not the sports, but the beaches and waterfront views that have always brought visitors to the area, though.

Lee Ann Levesque, director of property management for Coldwell Banker Sunstar-Morris Rentals, said she is 100 percent booked in winter rentals.

"I start booking in June, and I am all booked by September," Levesque said. "People feel comfortable in Charlotte County."

Sunshine Vacation's Johnston said she also has been "booked solid" in both Charlotte and Sarasota counties.

"What I'm finding is Englewood beaches are renting 100 to one," she said.

Both Levesque and Johnston said they can't find enough rental properties, and there is a need for people who can build more properties for people to rent.

One issue they said is creating an unequal playing field is out-of-state visitors who rent for a short term and do not pay the state's tourist development tax, also known as the "bed tax," which is a 5 percent charge on revenue from rentals of six months or less, according to the Sarasota County Tax Collector's Office.

"I've reported customers who say they aren't subject to the bed tax," Johnston said.

"Everyone needs to be on a level playing field - we are losing millions of dollars from people who benefit from our properties."

Johnston said larger rental organizations in the state are more prone to offer renters a "no-bed-tax" incentive, but the state's Department of Revenue has begun to be more proactive about the issue.

Ken Stead, vice president of the Englewood Florida Chamber of Commerce and general manager at Cape Haze Marina, said the bed-tax issue is also a problem with transient boaters, or boaters who visit an area for a short period of time.

Stead said the transient boater is an untapped market for Charlotte County. He said Stump Pass Beach in Englewood, on the southern end of Manasota Key, could be the solution.

"Right now, boaters skip right over us and go on to North Fort Myers, or Crow's Nest Marina in Venice," he said about the other popular stops for transient boaters in Southwest Florida.

Stead said people still come to the area for the water resources and ecotourism - fishing, kayaking, canoeing and, more recently, stand-up paddleboarding. He said room to expand these resources and bring in more boaters is limited in Englewood, though.

"If I had a crystal ball to look into the future, I would say we need public-private partnerships," Stead said.

He said the area needs more boat ramps and marinas, and public-private partnerships will be crucial in the future to help with the expenses of adding them.

Adding more water resources is not on the wish list for community members in DeSoto

County, though.

Buddy Mansfield, a DeSoto County commissioner, said he hopes a new facility for the annual rodeo show will put cities without beaches, like Arcadia, on the map for tourists.

The Arcadia All-Florida Championship Rodeo - "The Granddaddy of 'Em All!" - is held in March, and Mansfield said the event generates approximately \$2.7 million for the local community.

Last year the event set attendance records, and the city is raising money to build a new rodeo facility to hold the competition in a bigger arena that could sit close to 10,000 people.

"I think we have the potential to expand our show into more than a weekend competition," Mansfield said.

The current facility, the Arcadia Rodeo Arena, can seat about 6,000 people, according to Mansfield. He said each year organizers have to turn away hundreds of people because they reach capacity.

Arcadia is not the only city lacking a beach escape in Southwest Florida, though. North Port is another city on the map that lacks the draw of coastal views.

North Port city commissioner Cheryl Cook said the city has spent the past two decades focusing on building a foundation. She said improving the city's infrastructure has been the main priority.

"Any company wanting to come to the city can have a year off building now that we have a foundation," Cook said. "We don't have to play catch-up."

Cook said commissioners are directing City Manager Jonathan Lewis to start promoting the current amenities in the city, including ecotourism opportunities. The biggest attraction for the city is Warm Mineral Springs, an 81-acre property the city purchased that includes a spring with constant 87-degree mineral-rich water.

"We have a destination," Cook said. "It is very difficult to import a destination." Regardless of the destination though, whether it's sports, fishing, beaches, rodeos or the Springs, all community members agree that protecting the natural amenities should be the priority for the future of the region.

VisitFlorida.com projects 127 million annual tourists for the state by 2020, and that could create more than 315,000 hospitality jobs for Floridians.

Steiner warned that Florida, and local communities, must plan and care for its tourism market to accommodate the growth.

If not, as Steiner puts it: "We will kill the goose that laid the golden egg."

FLORIDA ECONOMIC NEWS

- Grants to encourage medical tourism in Florida ([IMTJ](#))
- Florida home prices hit milestone in November ([Palm Beach Post](#))
- Portable moving storage firm PODS is being sold ([Tampa Bay Times](#))
- Jesse Biter reappointed to Enterprise Florida ([Sarasota Herald-Tribune](#))
- Florida overtakes New York as third most populous state ([Tampa Bay Times](#))

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- U.S. growth rate hits 5%, strongest in a decade ([Fortune](#))



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