

WEEKEND WAVE

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Friday Economic Roundup

Enterprise Florida finalizes contract for new leader

News Service of Florida

Enterprise Florida has finalized a two-year contract with the former director of PortMiami to serve as Gov. Rick Scott's top business recruiter.

The contract, which includes a possible two-year extension, will pay Bill Johnson a base salary of \$265,000 per year.

The contract also includes the potential to receive a "target" bonus of \$100,000 per year.

Johnson, who must still sign the contract, will serve under the titles of Florida secretary of commerce and president and chief executive officer of Enterprise Florida.

He is slated to start with the state's public-private economic development agency on March 1, replacing Gray Swoope.

Swoope has been at the helm of Enterprise Florida the past four years.

Johnson spent eight years as director at PortMiami. His current position is director of the Miami-Dade Water and Sewer Department.

The Enterprise Florida board of directors agreed to offer Johnson the job on Jan. 22.

Swoope, who is paid \$275,000 per year by Enterprise Florida, is stepping down at the end of February.

Swoope hasn't offered a reason for his pending departure, which was announced in January.

In a Dec. 2 letter to Scott, Swoope said professionally "it is time for me to move on."

Swoope tweeted on Friday that he "will not be announcing what's next until Feb. 27. Stay tuned."

Punta Gorda an affordable place to retire

By BRENDA BARBOSA STAFF WRITER CHARLOTTE SUN

PUNTA GORDA - Once again, the city makes the cut of top places to retire on Kiplinger.com.

The personal finance magazine's website featured Punta Gorda and a handful of other U.S. cities as "the cheapest places where you'll want to retire." "Of the great many retirement hot spots in Florida, Punta Gorda tops our list," the site announced in its February 2015 issue.

To make its selection, Kiplinger used data on more than 200 metropolitan areas across the U.S., narrowed it down to 32 communities and picked 10 finalists.

"We identified the places with the cheapest living costs specifically for retirees," the website states. "We placed particular emphasis on reasonable price tags for the two biggest retirement budget-busters, health care and housing, and we also looked at states' tax burdens on retirees.

"Plus, in case you find that you want or need to go back to work to earn extra income, we sought out economically healthy areas with relatively low poverty," the website noted. "We favored areas with large populations of adults over 65, and because safety is paramount we weeded out cities with above-average crime rates."

Along with the state's favorable tax situation, Kiplinger.com credited the city's high ranking to its strong senior presence—the 65-and-older share of the metro area's population is the greatest of all 223 places we considered.

"And all those retirees have plenty to keep them busy," the online magazine noted. "The city offers 18 miles of bike paths and pedestrian trails, including the scenic Harborwalk along Charlotte Harbor that connect the various neighborhoods and parks. You can also enjoy boating and other water activities, as well as the charms of Fishermen's Village, a semi-open-air mall that's home to a marina, shops, seafood restaurants and free concerts."

Charlotte hiring event for Aldi planned

By SAMANTHA GHOLAR STAFF WRITER CHARLOTTE SUN

The value grocery chain Aldi, under construction in the area, has scheduled hiring fairs in Charlotte County and other communities for prospective employees in the coming weeks.

The discount supermarket chain, headquartered in Germany, will open its doors with a 17,018-square-foot store that will feature all the usual grocery store items - produce, dairy, meats and snacks - at lower prices than more popular grocery chains, company officials say. A late summer opening is planned at U.S. 41 and Salford Boulevard, near Perkins Restaurant, in North Port.

Aldi is looking to hire approximately 20 employees for that location and a new store in Bradenton, according to Aldi representatives. A press release states that Aldi is "known for offering wages and benefits that are higher than the national average for the retail industry."

The first of three hiring events takes place Feb. 17 in Sarasota at Hampton Inn Sarasota, located at 5995 Cattleridge Blvd. Aldi's second hiring fair will be held in Port Charlotte on March 4 at Country Inn and Suites at 24244 Corporate Court. The third event will be on March 12 at the Holiday Inn Express in Venice, 380 Commercial Court. All three hiring fairs will be held all day long, from 7 a.m. until 5 p.m.

Applicants seeking a position with the grocery store must be 18 years or older and hold a minimum of a high school diploma or GED. Retail experience for applicants is preferred, according to the release. Possible positions include: store associate (pay begins at \$11.25 per hour), shift managers (\$15.25 per hour) and manager trainee (with a starting salary of about \$43,680). Management experience is preferred for manager trainees.

Applicants must be available to work anytime between 6 a.m. and 11 p.m. Monday through Sunday, and submit to a drug screening and background check. They also have to be able to lift 45 pounds.

Staff working at least 25 hours a week receive full health insurance, dental coverage and 401K, the release states.

Employees could possibly receive training in another Aldi store in the area.

Aldi operates nearly 1,400 U.S. stores in 32 states, primarily from Kansas to the East

Coast. The Aldi enterprise - short for Albrecht Discount - was originally started by brothers Karl and Theo Albrecht in Europe. The company eventually split into two divisions - Aldi Nord and Aldi Süd. In the U.S., Aldi Süd operates as Aldi supermarkets; Aldi Nord, as Trader Joe's. For more information, go to www.aldi.us.

Kathy Baylis, former face of EDC, dies

John Hielscher Sarasota Herald-Tribune

Kathy Baylis, the founding president and chief executive of the Economic Development Corp. of Sarasota County, died Sunday. She was 67.

Baylis, who also served six years on the Sarasota-Manatee Airport Authority, passed away after a long battle with ovarian cancer.

"She was the right person at the right time to advance our economic development agenda - and she was an incredible human being," said Debra Jacobs, president and CEO of The Patterson Foundation.

Baylis left her mark during a 16-year career in economic development in Sarasota County, starting in 1995 as assistant director of the Committee of 100, the economic growth division of the Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce.

Four years later she took over the chamber's economic development arm, and in 2004 helped form and lead the newly named Sarasota EDC when it separated from the chamber. She retired in 2011 because of medical issues. She worked until recently as a consultant with the Patterson Foundation.

During her career, she assisted more than 215 companies with expansions, relocations or start-ups, including businesses like Boars Head and FCCI, that created more than 7,000 jobs, according to the Florida Economic Development Council.

"She laid a great foundation at the EDC and did exemplary work," said Mark Huey, her successor at the EDC. "We are reminded about the things she did every day."

Her legacy includes building bridges with Manatee County, Huey said, helping to end the two counties' poaching of companies from each other and creating an approach of "regionalism" to economic growth that benefited both.

She joined the governing body of the Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport in 2002, shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as one of the first appointed members after its switch from an often-contentious elected body.

"She was a great commissioner, and such a kind person," airport CEO Fredrick Piccolo said. "She understood, through her role in economic development, the importance and criticality of the airport to the region."

"She helped changed the tone and the way the board was operating from the elected days, to far more business-like," he said.

Bench bears her name

Baylis' first job was as a teenage typist at a family-owned manufacturing plant in Cincinnati.

She also managed the Plantation Golf & Country Club in Venice.

Baylis lived in Sarasota County for more than 40 years.

In a 2011 article she wrote in the Herald-Tribune, she described moving to the island of Venice, when people celebrated the arrival of the town's first McDonald's restaurant and watched movies at drive-in theaters where shopping centers now stand.

"I believe the future of our local economy lies in working as a community, continuing to focus on diversifying the types of industries that call Sarasota County home," Baylis wrote. "Working shoulder-to-shoulder in support of common goals is moving us toward an economy that will be better insulated from downturns."

Sarasota attorney Dan Bailey, the airport's general counsel, said her interests ranged from the natural environment to philanthropy to government.

"But she saw the inherent link between a strong economy and our quality of life and was passionate in her pursuit of both," he said.

David Sessions, a past chairman and current director of the EDC, called Baylis a "dedicated and disciplined leader."

"She helped shape what the EDC is today," said Sessions, president/CEO at Willis Smith Construction. "This community will miss her leadership, and I am saddened that Kathy's retirement was tragically shortened by this terrible disease."

About 20 of her friends gathered Jan. 31 for a hike in Oscar Scherer State Park - Baylis' favorite place to walk - and videotaped their thoughts about what she meant to them. She watched the video from the hospital bed in her bedroom, accompanied by longtime friend the Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet.

Baylis had arranged to have a bench with her name placed in the park, and her friends are

now raising funds to plant several live oak trees in her honor.

"I'll bet it will be a forest," Jacobs said.

A "celebration of life" will be held at 3 p.m. Thursday at St. Andrew United Church of Christ in Sarasota.

Halfacre construction: Breaking out of its mold

Josh Salman Sarasota Herald-Tribune

When the mid-2000s economy spiraled into recession, Halfacre Construction Co. knew it needed to find a way to break from its usual mold.

Nobody was building office headquarters anymore, retail contracts had pretty much dried up and once-promising corporate expansions statewide had been put on hold.

But the commercial construction manager found a way to offset the painful slide in private-sector spending.

The firm began bidding on more government work -- including road projects for the first time -- to help it withstand the prolonged slump that forced many of its competitors to close down.

That diversification has Halfacre poised to reap the benefits of an ongoing real estate recovery that could soon lift the lagging commercial sector.

"Businesses don't just buy a second building because they want to; it's very strongly tied to the economic environment," said Andrew Stultz, a Halfacre vice president. "Today, we are much more optimistic about our opportunities."

40 years of change

A family-owned business for more than 40 years, the company was founded in 1970 by Bill Halfacre.

The company moved three times, settling on its current location on Professional Parkway, in Lakewood Ranch, in 1999. Today, the firm has 25 employees.

In the 1980s, the company did a lot of its own building and site work. But now, Halfacre focuses solely on construction management, which allows it to operate with more consistent staffing and keep costs low through subcontracting.

Along the way, the company has overseen construction of some of the largest commercial projects built in Southwest Florida in recent memory. They include the original 400,000-square-foot PGT Inc. headquarters in Venice; Gold Coast Eagle's beverage distribution building in Lakewood Ranch; Sun Hydraulics' expansion in 2013; and the new Sarasota Association of Realtors office on Cattlemen Road.

But when the Great Recession took hold and work became scarce, the company turned to institutional jobs, including public schools, Sarasota County's Terrace Building downtown and Manatee County Utility Department structures.

Halfacre also became heavily involved in historical renovations, because it recognized that many buildings in Sarasota County were getting older and need refurbishing.

At the downtown Terrace building, the company has installed new piping, a backup generator system and remodeled restrooms on all 10 floors. In all, the Terrace project was valued at more than \$1.3 million, the company said.

"We were all hurt by the slow times, but diversifying allowed us to maintain staff and business, which was key," Stultz said. "If we were doing only one type of project, it would have been much more painful."

Hitting the road

Economic necessity also pushed Halfacre to try something it never had before: Road construction.

Although budgets were trimmed when decreased property values meant lower ad valorem taxes, many local governments still proceeded with road projects.

Though roadwork requires completely different expertise than constructing buildings, the company had staff members with infrastructure development in their background. It was a natural fit.

And it paid off. Last year, the company was awarded Charlotte County's Gasparilla Road project, a \$25 million improvement that calls for widening Gasparilla to a four-lane, divided corridor from State Road 776 to Rotonda Boulevard East.

Halfacre also will install sidewalks and bicycle lanes, a bridge and new utility lines.

Halfacre also has completed several multimillion-dollar construction projects at the Punta Gorda Airport, including a new terminal, administration building and 132-foot-tall air traffic control tower.

Also in Charlotte County, the firm built a new road for a massive Cheney Bros. distribution facility and widened a 15-mile stretch of Bermont Road.

But even those government jobs have not been easy to come by, as competition for work

has become fierce and tax shortfalls have delayed some projects for years.

"It's been somewhat of a rollercoaster ride," said Halfacre president Jack Cox, who took over the company from his father, John Cox. The elder Cox had bought the company from Bill Halfacre in 1984.

"Right when you think a project will get allocated, it's postponed," Cox said.

Private-sector comeback

Cox believes the market for private-sector work, however, is beginning to turn a corner. Commercial construction generally lags behind residential construction by several months -- sometimes even years.

That's because new rooftops generally fuel demand for businesses ranging from retail to financial services and even warehouses for smaller contractors or suppliers.

But signs point to encouraging times ahead. Homebuilding in 2014 flirted with its busiest year since the housing boom of the mid-2000s. As a result, some other sectors are picking up as well. That rebound has been especially robust for medical centers and restaurants, Cox said.

Office construction, however, remains slow, and most industry observers expect it to remain that way for the foreseeable future.

Office vacancy is still generally considered too high to warrant new building, with a 15.7 percent vacancy rate in Southwest Florida's 7 million square feet of office space in the third quarter of last year.

Rental rates also have not improved enough to justify investing in new offices yet, though some new office space is coming online as a result of user-specific needs.

"Most of the construction going on right now is residential," said Barry Seidel, a commercial broker and president of American Property Group of Sarasota Inc.

"But where ever you have residential, you need the retail and commercial that supports it. I think we will see more of that in the future."

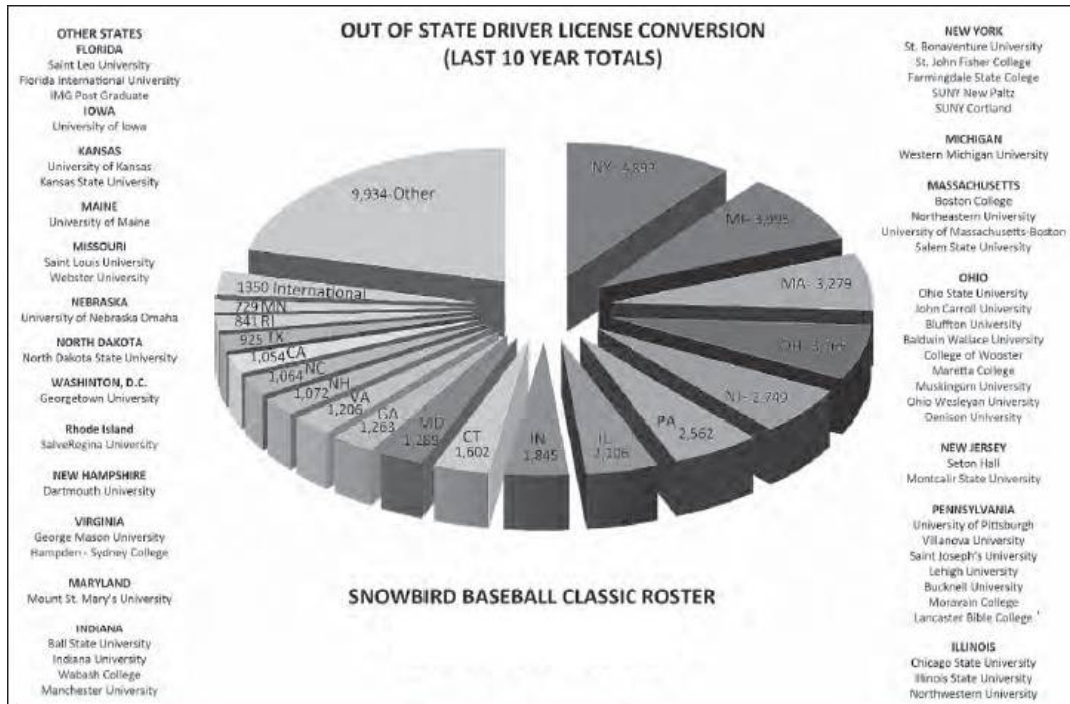
Revisit America's greatest pastime at Charlotte parks

Tom Patton Charlotte Sun

June of 2006, a former high school baseball teammate and his son challenged me to join them in Omaha to cheer for our Oregon State Beaver team in the College Baseball World Series. World record at making a long story short; I joined them, "we" (Beaver Nation), won our first NCAA Championship, and it was probably the utmost sports week I have experienced in my life.

Aside from the fan glory of winning, I experienced a week full of watching multiple great baseball games each day. I witnessed the enthusiasm and athleticism of these college baseball players, preserving and reveling in America's greatest pastime. Remember before TV and video games, baseball was what kids did after school, on the weekends and during the summer. Baseball was literally how America passed the time, hence "America's greatest pastime."

Now through April 1, Steve Partington's Snowbird Classic can be experienced daily at fields in north and south Charlotte County. We are so lucky to have this premier preseason college tournament in our backyard where over 50 NCAA teams come to play.



These young men are chasing a dream of major league proportions. Our demographics strongly suggest a team from your home state is playing (see Charlotte's migration chart, overlaid with a roster of this years teams).

While in Charlotte County, those teams and their families will explore our community, eat in our restaurants and stay in our hotels. How about a community effort to make them feel welcome? Buy a hot dog for a player at the concessions. Pick up a tip if you see them as a group in our restaurants. Put on your alumni cap and go see a game, or contact the field caterer and buy your team a lunch at the park. It might be one of the most remembered alumni gifts of the year for the baseball team, and you might just rekindle an old baseball interest.

Four teams at this year's Snowbird Classic participated in the Division I College World Series playoffs last year. Division III has three teams here this year that are rated in the pre-season top 20, including powerhouse Marietta.

An all-day pass at the ballpark costs only \$7, where you can enjoy concurrent games throughout the day. Come enjoy America's pastime by bringing your folding chair to the park for some sunshine, fresh air, and excellent baseball. You likely have a home team you can pull for. Head to the park over the next six weeks and bring back some baseball, hot dogs and apple pie to your life. I'll be out there pulling for Western Michigan for my slice of the pie.

Tom Patton is the director of the Charlotte County Economic Development Office.

FLORIDA ECONOMIC NEWS

- More help-wanted ads suggest better economy ([Sarasota Herald-Tribune](#))
- Tech jobs grow 4.2 percent in Florida ([South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#))
- Florida among states with largest increase in tech employment ([Orlando Business Journal](#))
- Florida sets another tourism record ([Sarasota Herald-Tribune](#))

US ECONOMIC NEWS

- Stronger U.S. growth seen in 2015 ([Reuters](#))

ENTREPRENEUR NEWS

- Entrepreneurs get a taste of 'Shark Tank' styled encounter ([Tallahassee Democrat](#))
- The revolution in what it means to be a small business ([The Week](#))

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