

WEEKEND WAVE

3-20-15



Friday Economic Roundup

Charlotte Harbor eyes waterfront makeover

By GARY ROBERTS STAFF WRITER CHARLOTTE SUN

CHARLOTTE HARBOR - The crumbling seawalls and vacant wasteland of broken concrete and overgrown vegetation that greet motorists driving across the U.S. 41 North bridge are, at long last, near renovation. Starting this spring, construction will begin on the Gateway Harbor Walk project that will increase pedestrian and boater access to Charlotte Harbor, and rid the area of a most visible eyesore.

This week the County Commission hired a contractor to start developing the area into the natural attraction it was always meant to be, but never realized. The first phase of waterfront park improvements will include the replacement of the battered seawall, along with a new pedestrian promenade on the east side of the bridge, small-boat launch, restrooms and parking.

The second phase - a local option sales tax project slated to commence next year - would include pedestrian pathways from the promenade to a boardwalk crossing underneath the bridge, a fishing pier and a water taxi dock facility. There will also be extensive landscaping and decorative lighting.

Although the multiyear project is just beginning, it is already beset by cost overruns. The

initial phase came in at \$2.3 million, far exceeding the original projection.

"The numbers are higher than the estimated cost," said Debrah Forester, county redevelopment manager.

That's when the commission agreed to fund the shortfall with a \$1.1 million loan from General Fund reserves. This remedy, however, presents its own set of financial ills. The loan must be paid back by the Charlotte Harbor Community Redevelopment Area, which is already paying for the bulk of phase one improvements.

"I'm a little concerned over the CRA being responsible for the overage," Commissioner Ken Doherty said during Tuesday's meeting. "It's going to take, obviously, forever for that to be paid back. It's not a realistic situation."

But there is some additional project funding rolling in. The West Coast Inland Navigation District, which collects ad valorem taxes from property owners in a four-county region, has made a verbal commitment to contribute \$331,760 in grant money for seawall replacement. In addition, the county has applied for \$157,000 from the Charlotte County Marine Advisory Committee.

Despite the financial setbacks, and the protracted delays, commissioners are looking forward to the day when Gateway Park becomes a popular year-round destination.

"This is such an important effort for Charlotte County," Commissioner Stephen R. Deutsch said. "This is the beginning of a very positive revitalization of Charlotte County that has been long-sought and badly needed."

Tourist tax collections up

PROVIDED BY CHARLOTTE HARBOR VISITOR & CONVENTION BUREAU

The Charlotte Harbor Visitor & Convention Bureau announced Tourist Development Tax Revenues collected during January 2015 totaled \$418,782.

This is up 27.1 percent compared to January 2014 which collected \$329,503. To date, Fiscal Year collections (October 2014 - January '15) total \$575,071, which is up 21.8 percent over the previous year.

"Tourism growth continues at a very strong pace. The harsh winter in the Midwest and Northeast has been a blessing to Florida Tourism," said Lorah Steiner, director of the Charlotte Harbor Visitor & Convention Bureau. "People came earlier this year and as the snow kept falling up north, visitors stayed longer. What's encouraging is when the snow melts it appears Charlotte County will still be benefiting from a robust economy. Several area accommodations have told us they are seeing an increase in reservations for the summer season."

"At Palm Island Resort, we started to see a significant swing upwards in regard to visitation last summer," said Rick Brunette, vice president and general manager of Palm Island Resort. "For the past eight months, the trends continue to be strong with greater demand in both the number of stays as well as in the length of a stay. All tracking and statistical indicators reflect a continuation of this trend through the summer and we are confident in the predictions that 2016 will realize a sustained growth in tourism."

Brunette added, "All of us who benefit from this increase in business should be very proud of the interest that Charlotte County has captured in the eyes of our visiting guests and by trending above other regional and state destinations. In speaking to local colleagues within the hospitality profession, we are all focusing our attention on serving our guests with a level of detail that will capture their interest in returning to Charlotte County often."

Charlotte County levies a 5 percent Tourist Development Tax (TDT) on accommodation stays six months or less in addition to the 7 percent sales tax. The first 3 percent is spent for tourism promotion and marketing support and the fourth and fifth percent are used to fund the debt for the bond for the recent renovations at the Charlotte Sports Park.

Data on the fly Airport officials seek to quantify regional impact

By BRENDA BARBOSA STAFF WRITER CHARLOTTE SUN

PUNTA GORDA - For years, Punta Gorda Airport officials have touted the airport's economic benefits to Charlotte County. But little data, if any, exists to quantify those claims. Now officials want to change that.

At a Charlotte County Airport Authority meeting Thursday, Commissioner Pam Seay revealed the airport's plans to conduct a survey of the more than half a million passengers who use the airport to isolate where they are going, how long they will stay, and what they

plan to do during their visit.

The hope is to gather enough statistically valid data to measure the airport's impact in the region, Seay said.

"We know there is one. But what is it?" she said. "The increase in numbers here at the airport has demonstrated this is a very popular destination for folks. (But) what we want to do is prove that with numbers."

"The Punta Gorda Airport (has) an impact well beyond our region," Seay added. "But you can't just anecdotally say, 'Yeah, we're doing that. Look, we have a half-million people.'"

In the last four years, the airport's passenger counts have exploded. To underscore the point, Seay played a video of real estate expert Stan Stouder speaking last month at a MarketWatch Real Estate conference in Fort Myers.

Stouder noted a whopping 244 percent increase in passenger traffic at the Punta Gorda Airport (PGD), compared with Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW) in Fort Myers, between 2010 and 2014.

"I don't know that I ever envisioned using the words hot spot and Charlotte County in the same sentence," Stouder said. "But there's so much going on in Charlotte County."

Stouder pointed to the airport's sole carrier Allegiant Air's low-cost travel from Punta Gorda to more than 20 destinations across the country as one of the reasons for the growth. "You can fly to Asheville, N.C., for 80 bucks. I can't get to Ocala for 80 bucks in four hours," he joked. "It's a great deal, and it's really driving the market."

"How do we know that this is having an effect?" he asked the hundreds of audience members in Fort Myers that day. "Out of Florida's 67 counties, Charlotte County had the greatest percentage increase in the fourth quarter in the number of homes sold over any other county. (Half a million) people are coming through PGD, and a bunch of them are staying, and a bunch of them are spending money up there, and they are buying homes, which means that they're not coming down here. They're not coming to Lee or Collier county."

To that end, airport officials want hard data to back up the claims.

But first they have to find the money to pay for the roughly \$15,000 study, Seay said.

Airport officials are planning to meet with leaders from VisitFlorida and the Charlotte County tourism and economic development offices to see whether they would like to partner with the airport on the study.

Bradenton Area EDC officers

The Bradenton Area Economic Development Corp. announced its officers and directors for 2015.

Officers are chairman Mark Barnebey, Blalock Walters PA; chairman-elect Michael Moschella, Hancock Bank; immediate past chairman John L. Rice, Rice's Appliance, TV & Outdoor Power Products; secretary Chris Brandt, It Works!; and treasurer Carol Probstfeld, State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota.

Joining the officers on the EDC's executive committee are at-large directors Rick Piccolo, Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport; and Rick Fawley, Fawley Bryant Architects. Trudy Moon, Air & Energy, represents the Manatee Chamber of Commerce on the committee.

New members of the board of directors in 2015 are Jamie Humphrey, Roskamp Institute; Heather Kasten, Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance; Todd Mathes, Benderson Development; Bob Rosinsky, Goodwill Manasota; David Sessions, Willis A. Smith Construction; Andy Stultz, Halfacre Construction; Doug Wagner, Manatee Technical College; and Nathan Kragt, ZNS Engineering.

Directors continuing to serve are Jackie Barron, Mosaic Co.; Bob Bartz, Manatee Chamber of Commerce; Manatee County Commissioner Vanessa Baugh; Kirk Boylston, Schroeder-Manatee Ranch; Shari Brickley, Herald-Tribune Media Group; Palmetto Mayor Shirley Groover Bryant; Carlos Buqueras, Port Manatee executive director; Chris Ciaccio, IMG Academy; Ted Ehrlichman, CareerSource Suncoast; Trevor Gooby, Pittsburgh Pirates; Joe Hembree, Hembree & Associates Inc.; Manatee County Administrator Ed Hunzeker; Stephen Jaynes, xByte Technologies; Josh McCoy, SunTrust Bank; Chris Perkins, Fifth Third Bank; Bradenton Mayor Wayne Poston; Bill Poulton, Tropicana Products; Ryan Saunders, Bright House Networks; Misty Servia, King Engineering; Byron Shinn, Shinn & Co.; Karen Stewart, Manatee County government; David Teitelbaum, Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce; Darrell Turner, Turner Tree & Landscape; Brian Volner, C1 Bank; and Longboat Key City Commissioner Patricia Zunz.

Amzaon.com introduces Prime Now to Baltimore, Miami

NEW YORK (AP) - Amazon.com is expanding its one-hour delivery Prime Now service to Baltimore and Miami.

The service, which works through a mobile app, is already available in sections of New York City.

The company says that the service will be expanded only to certain zip codes within Baltimore and Miami at first, but it plans to further expand within each city soon.

Accepting Applications for RESTORE Funding

The Charlotte County RESTORE (Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies) Act Advisory Board is accepting applications for project funding requests. RESTORE funds apply to programs, projects, and activities that restore and protect the environment and economy of the Gulf Coast. Applications are available online - visit www.CharlotteCountyFL.gov and click "[RESTORE Act Funding Application](#)" in the Hot Topics list. Paper copies are available in Administration at 18500 Murdock Circle, Port Charlotte. Application deadline: 5:00 p.m. Friday, April 17, 2015. For more information, call 941.743.1944.

FLORIDA ECONOMIC NEWS

- Lawmakers put spotlight on film/TV incentives in Florida ([Tampa Bay Times](#))
- The majority of small and medium Florida businesses are ready to grow ([South Florida Business Journal](#))
- Publix is buying up property in Florida ([Sarasota Herald-Tribune](#))
- Orlando ranks No. 9 for working women ([Orlando Sentinel](#))
- Naples-based clothing line out to save your skin ([Fort Myers News-Press](#))

US ECONOMIC NEWS

- Growing Spirit Airlines to hire 1,500 workers in 2015 ([South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#))
- SBA's initiative aims to aid and grow LGBT businesses ([South Florida Business Journal](#))
- People in the South move more than those in other US regions ([Tampa Bay Times](#))

ENTREPRENEUR NEWS

- Tips for growing your business with seminars, conferences, and workshops ([Ron Stein](#))
- Why small business means big business for Facebook Inc. ([The Motley Fool](#))
- Small business loans keep breaking records ([Small Business Trends](#))
- Startup Quest® programs being offered by Career Source Florida ([Florida Trend](#))
- Technology is about to usher in the 'circular' economy ([Information Age](#))
- Why now is the best time to start your own business ([Entrepreneur](#))
- How cities can woo small businesses ([The Week](#))

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