

WEEKEND WAVE

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Friday Economic Roundup

Home building spikes to 51 percent

Brian Gleason Editorial Page Editor Charlotte Sun

New home construction and sales of existing homes continued to spike in Charlotte County in March, according to the latest Regional Economic Indicators report released Thursday by the Regional Economic Research Institute at Florida Gulf Coast University's Lutgert College of Business.

Charlotte County issued 65 single-family building permits in March 2015, an increase of 51 percent over March 2014, according to the report, while sales of existing homes rose 35 percent to 474 in March 2015. The \$166,075 median price was 17 percent higher than March 2014.

Taxable sales eclipsed the \$200 million mark in January, rising 9 percent to \$202.4 million from \$185.2 million in January 2014. Part of the boost is attributable to visitor spending.

"Charlotte County's seasonally adjusted tourist tax revenues were \$280,833 in February 2015, 19 percent higher than February 2014," according to the report. That represents the highest growth rate in the three county coastal area of Lee, Collier and Charlotte counties,

although Charlotte's revenues in real dollar terms remain far below the \$3,208,862 generated in Lee and \$1,695,887 in Collier.

Many of the Charlotte visitors are arriving via Punta Gorda Airport, which set a record in March when 93,171 passengers arrived and/or departed via Allegiant Airlines. That's up 21 percent over the March 2014 figure of 76,917 - also a record - and up 40.6 percent over February 2015's 66,254.

Achieva to buy Calusa Bank for \$23.2 million

John Hielscher, Sarasota Herald-Tribune

In a first for the Florida financial industry, Achieva Credit Union plans to buy Calusa Bank of Punta Gorda for \$23.2 million.

Achieva will add \$165 million in assets and four offices in North Port, Port Charlotte, Punta Gorda and Venice.

Financial adviser Hovde Group calls it a "ground-breaking" transaction - the first "whole bank" acquisition in the U.S. by a credit union.

Previous transactions were structured as purchase and assumption of a majority of assets and deposits of distressed banks.

It is also only the seventh time that a credit union has purchased a bank, and is the largest deal of its kind, Hovde said.

Calusa, a commercial bank founded in 2007, can become members of Achieva, a cooperative with \$1.1 billion in assets and 120,000 members.

The deal also marries players from two often combative segments of the financial sector. A major dispute is that non-profit credit unions don't pay state or federal income taxes or sales taxes, a status that banks have long tried but failed to overturn in Congress.

The sale, subject to Calusa shareholder and regulatory approvals, is expected to close in the fourth quarter of 2015.

Achieva already operates branches in south Sarasota and Lee counties, so the acquisition will fill in that gap in its footprint, said CEO Gary Regoli.

"To build a base that Calusa already has would take a larger investment and quite a bit of time," Regoli said. "It's not that we're trying to be impatient, but it just makes sense for us to look at this type of transaction, especially if it makes financial sense."

Achieva, based in Dunedin, came to this area in 2010 when it took over the teetering Sarasota Coastal Credit Union.

"Our success in Sarasota has been very gratifying," Regoli said. "Everything we've been reading and been told is that the future is bright for the Southwest coast of Florida."

Calusa's 3,000 customers will have to "opt in" to join the credit union.

Calusa chairman/CEO Lew Albert said his bank was not on the block, but when he was approached by a dealmaker in February, talks began in earnest.

"We were not for sale," he said. "So when you're not on the market looking for a buyer, price is certainly a significant factor in my decision making."

Achieva will pay \$11.50 in cash for each share from Calusa's nearly 200 stockholders. That equates to a 35 percent premium over the bank's book value.

Calusa, one of nine Southwest Florida community banks to survive the Great Recession, also recognized that it needed to grow to compete in an increasingly burdensome regulatory environment, Albert said.

"At \$165 million we don't have that critical mass," Albert said. "With the inability to attract capital because of all the pressures on earnings, it makes it difficult for us to gain critical mass."

The bank now has four full-time employees dealing with regulatory compliance issues that did not exist when it opened eight years ago, he said.

Calusa has 38 employees. Achieva plans to keep all four offices open and retain as many people as possible, Regoli said.

"We also cannot guarantee 100 percent employment," he added.

Albert, who soon turns 63, and bank president Todd Katz will not stay on but will serve as consultants.

This is the second Charlotte County bank the two have built and sold. Their 7-year-old Tarpon Coast Bank in Port Charlotte was purchased in 2005 by Busey Bank for \$35.6 million in cash and stock.

Achieva, now with 20 offices, earned \$12 million in 2014. Analyst Bauer Financial rates it at the top five stars, or "superior."

Calusa posted a \$420,000 profit last year and just reported \$90,000 in first-quarter earnings. Bauer grades it at four stars, or "excellent."

Here We Grow Again

Brian Gleason Editorial Page Editor Charlotte Sun

Charlotte County will be the focus of the Urban Land Institute's fourth series titled "Here We Grow Again: How Southwest Florida is Tackling Future Growth."

The May 15 session will feature Charlotte County Commission Chairman Bill Truex, Charlotte County Economic Development Director Tom Patton, Enterprise Charlotte Economic Council President Andy Stultz, Kitson & Partners Senior Vice President Al Dougherty and KB Homes Executive Vice President Rick Dalton.

Charlotte County is projected to grow 4.7 percent by 2020 to 174,121 residents and 8.8 percent by 2025 to nearly 181,000 people. Those figures don't include seasonal residents who swell the actual population by tens of thousands of people between November and April.

Among the topics on the agenda are Babcock Ranch, Murdock Village and the Punta Gorda Interstate Airport Park. The meeting will be from 7:45 a.m. to 10 a.m. in Room 111 of Florida Gulf Coast University's Sudgen Hall. The registration fee is \$35 for ULI members and \$50 for nonmembers. Registration closes May 13. To register, call 800-321-5011 (reference #8118-1521) or go to www.swflorida.uli.org.

Truex and Patton also will be participating in the Fort Myers News-Press' Regional Economic Development Summit from 8 a.m. to noon, May 11 at the Harborside Event Center in Fort Myers. The event will feature Chris Gheysens, president and CEO of Wawa, the fast-growing gas station/convenience store chain which last week opened three locations in Lee County.

To register go to, www.news-press.com/economicsummit.

Fort Myers investors buy Port Charlotte strip mall for \$615,000

By Michael Braga Sarasota Herald-Tribune

500 Fordham Group LLC, a Sarasota company managed by Mark C. Ackerman, sold a 4,875-square-foot strip mall at 21320 Gertrude Avenue in Port Charlotte to Bandham LLC for \$615,000.

The mall last changed hands for \$250,000 in November 2013.

It was built in 1975.

Bandham LLC is a Fort Myers company managed by Jimmy Patel, Susmita Patel and Reema Banjara.

Richard's Foodporium to open in North Port

By Justine Griffin, Sarasota Herald-Tribune

Richard's Foodporium, a locally-based and family-owned chain of natural and specialty food stores, will open a new grocery store in North Port next month.

The new store will open in the The Shoppers of North Port shopping center at Tamiami Trail and Sumter Boulevard. The food retailer signed a lease for the 14999 Tamiami Trail space with Om Ventures on April 1. Construction has already begun, and the store is slated to open by the end of June.

The inside of the store will have a similar look and feel to other Richard's stores in the Sarasota and Tampa Bay areas, and will sell a mix of bulk foods, vitamins, supplements and grocery goods.

Other tenants in the plaza include a Goodwill, H&R Block, Papa John's Pizza and a You Fit Health Club, among others.

"We're excited to be opening a store in North Port. We've received numerous requests from consumers there, and it's a market pocket we've wanted to fill for a long time," said owner, John Rorer. "It's a perfect location, and I expect this store to jump out quickly." Rorer said he saw an opportunity to be at the forefront of offering natural and specialty foods to the North Port community.

The new store will be open from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Saturday and from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday.

Richard's Foodporium has 18 grocery stores in Florida and 16 company-owned stores. The chain also operates a 22,000-square-foot warehouse complex in north Sarasota.

Sarasota County backs I-75 visitor center

MURDOCK - Sarasota County commissioners have responded with a high level of excitement and expectation after hearing the latest proposal for a Southwest Florida Visitor Center.

The regional visitor center in Charlotte County would replace the former Jones Loop rest area off Interstate 75, which the state shut down in April.

Since that closure was announced in November, Charlotte officials have trumpeted the call for a welcome center to serve Southwest Florida.

At a recent joint meeting of Charlotte and Sarasota county commissioners, the latest developments of the planned visitor hub were unveiled, and met with emphatic approval.

"I'm there," Sarasota County Commissioner Alan Maio said. "I'd like to see where this can go."

The visitor center would direct tourists to local points of interest, capitalizing on what the area has to offer.

Although still just a concept, the facility would not only provide motorists with information but could also feature a bird sanctuary, arts and crafts, agricultural products and ecology display - all distinct to Southwest Florida.

In addition, fishing and boating could be a part of the plan, taking advantage of the 20-acre site's location adjacent to Alligator Creek.

Already, the interior counties of Glades and Hendry have voiced support for the cooperative venture, with the coastal counties of Collier, Lee and Sarasota also expressing interest. Some area municipalities could be involved as well.

"I love the idea," Sarasota County Commissioner Charles Hines said. "A place that has something uniquely Florida, and then unique to Southwest Florida. We don't really have that."

Charlotte Commissioner Chris Constance said he has been meeting with state officials, who have also reacted favorably to the proposal.

Constance has talked with Florida Department of Transportation Secretary Jim Boxold, who agreed to hold off on any sale or lease of the property until the six-county consortium solidifies its plan. He has also pitched the idea to Gov. Rick Scott.

During his presentation to Sarasota County officials, Constance provided further evidence of how a visitor center would prove a boon to the local tourist trade.

Although the state shuttered the rest stop because it deemed the daily count of 750 visitors wasn't enough, Constance said a tourist information center could attract at least 1,000 vehicles per day, more than paying for itself.

Sarasota County Commissioner Christine Robinson asked if there has been any analysis done on the 50,000 motorists who pass by daily on I-75, wondering how many are tourists.

Lorah Steiner, Charlotte County director of tourism, said there are a lot of visitors driving throughout the Sunshine State, looking for new experiences.

"Travelers in Florida don't stay in one place and stay put. They explore," Steiner said. "We really want a place where people can see all of their options."

Moreover, the center's location is ideal for capturing traffic leaving Punta Gorda Airport, Constance said. Each year the airport's passenger count doubles, and is expected to break the 1 million mark in 2015.

As passenger totals mount, so will the number of tourists seeking information on local points of interest, he added.

"It's a very significant flow of people that head south (on Piper Road) to get on (I-75)," Constance said.

However, the cost of establishing a visitor center remains an unknown.

FDOT officials have appraised the property at \$9 million, but said the sale price is negotiable. In addition, the participating counties would have to build additional facilities and maintain the site. Possible financial assistance could come from the state, Constance said. Hines suggested enlisting the private sector.

Charlotte Commissioner Ken Doherty said state legislators have been receptive to the idea, but are withholding judgment until more details emerge. Southwest Florida leaders also are waiting for the final price tag.

"Everybody's warm to the concept, but no one's volunteered to get their checkbook yet," Doherty said. "That's where the rubber meets the road."

And even Charlotte officials have their qualms.

"Cost is one of my hold-ups," Chairman Bill Truex said.

Doherty said the next step is to draw up a business plan that includes spending estimates, and time is an issue.

"We need to do this quickly. DOT will not have that pause button pressed for very long," Doherty said.

But Constance said a region with a combined population of 1.7 million people can be powerful, and persuasive.

"We're all going to have to work together to make this fly," Constance said.

Sarasota County to seek 'Age-Friendly' designation

By Barbara Peters Smith

"Safety islands" in the middle of broad boulevards, so slow-moving pedestrians can wait for traffic to clear. Bathrooms in parks, with high seats and grab bars. Older adult swim sessions at the local Y.

Or maybe just an overall civic attitude that prompts a stranger to hold open a heavy door for an elder, without stopping to think about it.

These are the tangible and abstract elements that can comprise what has been officially known since 2006 as an "Age-Friendly Community." And Sarasota County is the first place in Florida to apply for membership in a club that now numbers 258 worldwide.

Wednesday the Sarasota County Commission is expected to endorse that effort - the first formal step in a public campaign to get residents talking about what would make this region a more healthy and hospitable place to grow old in the 21st century.

"Thought leaders" - international experts on aging in place - will visit Sarasota to lead forums, and a website (agefriendly Sarasota.org) will solicit comments and suggestions. Kathy Black, a gerontologist and professor at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee, has been laying groundwork for the initiative behind the scenes, and will lead the community discussion.

After a two-year countywide exploration of what matters to residents, Black said, "people will be voting, essentially, on things that we've identified. It's about mobilizing people and having them think differently."

Funded for now by The Patterson Foundation, the local campaign is working in partnership with AARP Florida, the Florida Policy Exchange Center on Aging at the University of South Florida, Sarasota County Health and Human Services, and USF Sarasota-Manatee.

Sarasota - with its early bird menus, 55-and-over neighborhoods and balmy winters that are kind to aching joints - might seem to be age-friendly enough already, without going to the trouble of earning any merit badges. But planners who have been through this process testify that concentrating on what is best for older residents produces a better environment for everybody.

"What it seems to come down to is that the heart of it is social connectivity, not being isolated," said Allen Glicksman, director of research for the Philadelphia Corporation for Aging. "We've come to a better recognition of how environment and health are intimately intertwined for all our citizens."

What we want for the future

Launched by the World Health Organization, the age-friendly city movement was taken up in 2012 by AARP - to acknowledge and adapt to two powerful global trends, longevity and urbanization.

As populations around the world begin to look more like Sarasota County, with a larger share of residents 65 and older, communities getting with the program - like New York City, Atlanta, Des Moines and Sausalito - appear to be surpassing Florida in their focus on what older people want and need.

In April, AARP launched a new, interactive Livability Index, to recognize the best U.S. places for people 50 and older. Florida communities did not do well by this measure, in large part because of suburban sprawl and a lack of alternatives for those who can't drive. But Debra Jacobs, CEO of Patterson, emphasized that the goal is not to dwell on local shortcomings.

"We look at this as aspirational, not problem-solving," she said. "It's about what we want for the future. We want to see what can emerge with an intentional process."

Philadelphia's initiative - started in 2003 and modeled on a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency definition of age-friendliness - began by asking the city's young people to envision the kind of place where they would want to grow old.

"That group is still alive and well and working hard," Glicksman said. "They've done a lot of work on what makes parks appealing for older adults. What came out were these two issues of safety and bathrooms. It was a window into a whole set of challenges for people who may want to visit a park but are concerned about it."

The same issues identified by older Philadelphians, he pointed out, "also apply to a mom with a baby in a stroller."

To frame the conversation here, Black will draw on research she conducted in 2010 and 2011, surveying locals on what constitutes "aging with dignity and independence." Sponsored by Patterson and SCOPE - Sarasota County Openly Plans for Excellence - the exercise yielded topics that mirror the eight "domains of livability" laid out in the age-friendly process.

These domains range from infrastructure issues like transportation and outdoor spaces, to social attributes like communication, inclusion and respect. Communities can choose the domains they will focus on, Black said, and the number of goals they pursue.

Becoming more age-friendly "may not cost anything," she said. "This is about doing things differently, doing them smarter. We might say to a restaurant, 'The next time you reprint your menu, please make the font size bigger.'"

Jacobs said Patterson will underwrite the application process "as long as it's working." "I don't want to create this perception that there's going to be this wonderful bible of a plan," she said. "We're not funding the outcome; we're funding the journey."

Facts: INTERESTED?

Age-Friendly Sarasota: Visit agefriendlysarasota.org to learn about ways to participate, or follow Age-Friendly Sarasota on Facebook. To reach initiative leader Kathy Black, send an email to info@agefriendlysarasota.org.

U.S. Age-Friendly Communities: aarp.org/agefriendly

The global initiative: who.int/ageing/projects/age_friendly

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