

WEEKEND WAVE

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Friday Economic Roundup

New airport terminal opens in Charlotte County

By Sarasota Herald-Tribune

The Charlotte County Airport Authority held a dedication ceremony Tuesday for the expanded Punta Gorda Airport Bailey Terminal. The 42,000-square-foot expansion project was completed in March. It includes six gates with more than 1,000-seat waiting area, a full-service restaurant and bar, 20 check-in counters, two baggage claim belts and new TSA screening and checkpoints. The project cost \$8.3 million. The facility was named in honor of the seven Bailey brothers from Punta Gorda who volunteered to serve their country in World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars.

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Cheney Brothers: Expanding, hiring, going solar

By BILL JONES Sun Correspondent

It's been a whirlwind six months for Charlotte County's newest economic engine. Cheney Brothers' food distribution center near Punta Gorda Airport is steadily increasing its financial impact on the area, exceeding even initial company and Charlotte County expectations.

Cheney will build out to add 100,000 square feet to its 345,000-square-foot dry warehouse section; is increasing significantly its 300-plus employee base, and is planning to build a solar farm on an adjacent eight-acre parcel to help power the future of the enterprise.

And that's in just the next year.

Also planned within the next two to three years, according to Cheney chairman and CEO Byron Russell, is a separate 50,000-square-foot meat-cutting facility to support the company's meat business.

Last week, according to Russell, Cheney expanded its truck routes to include the Tampa area, increasing its Punta Gorda-based truck fleet by one-third and expanding its volume of deliveries by 30 percent.

"From the beginning, I was optimistic about our growth (in Punta Gorda)," Russell said, "but it's double what we expected. We've got a good team. I'm proud of what they've done."

Also, he said, he was "humbled" by Cheney's support in the community.

On that front, he said, the company is working with area restaurants in an effort to bring back the traditional Block Party to Punta Gorda.

"We've agreed to do it if the city and the county want in," he said. "We will do our part to help, (including) bringing in sponsors. We want to be a big part of this community."

Shane Simmons, president of the Punta Gorda operations, said the rapid growth continues to necessitate expanded hiring at the plant.

The local facility opened in October 2015, with 150 employees, expanded to 340 by last month and is continuing to hire to meet growth demands.

Particularly needed are Class A drivers with a commercial driver's license, and day and night warehouse staff, including pallet drivers, fork lift operators and maintenance personnel.

Cheney employees have full benefits, including 401Ks and paid sick leave, he said, and the night warehouse staff, called "selectors" are incentivized for the speed and accuracy of their work in selecting products for trucks.

The pay for selectors, Simmons said, ranges between \$15 and \$30 an hour, enabling salaries between \$65,000 and \$85,000 a year for "top" selectors.

"It's tough work," he said, "and may be more of a young person's game," but it's a good way to become a member of a long-standing family owned business.

Simmons said the warehouse expansion was expected for the future, "but not this early. It's six months ahead of schedule." An existing wall will be taken down to build out the storage space in the facility's "dry," or non-air conditioned warehouse wing. Plans are to begin construction in the next 12 months.

Simmons said the solar farm is in the early planning stages, with decisions on its financial aspects such as acquiring or leasing the land yet to be made.

CEO Russell added that a solar farm "makes sense. It's great for us and for the country." He said the Punta Gorda facility's automated technology and state-of-the-art heating and cooling system have resulted in electric bills half those at a similar sized warehouse at Cheney's headquarters in Riviera Beach. And it is expected the solar farm "would cut it in half again."

On the construction of a separate meat-cutting facility, "We are big into beef in our business," Russell said, "as symbolized by the bull monument guarding the entrance to the facility. "Florida beef is getting bigger and bigger," he said, so the company will soon need a meat division in Punta Gorda to augment similar facilities elsewhere in the state.

He estimated that permitting and construction will take some two to three years.

A large retail component within the facility, the "Cheney Express," is experiencing increased community participation, according to Lynn Juillerat, director of marketing. It's a cash and carry store with product pack items similar to Costco and Sam's Club, with significantly reduced supermarket prices, but without membership fees.

Its products are selected from among the warehouse's 12,000 items in stock, covering, she said, "everything from soup to nuts."

The \$40 million, 35-acre Punta Gorda facility is Cheney's fifth in Florida. It delivers nationally branded food products, including its own, as well as equipment, cleaning supplies and disposable items to restaurants from Marco Island to Tampa and points east.

Cheney Brothers opened in 1925 as a mom-and-pop operation with one truck delivering milk and eggs. It's now one of the state's largest privately owned companies, reporting sales



Cheney Brothers cash and carry store at its Punta Gorda facility. Cheney Express offers reduced supermarket prices from the company's stock of 12,000 products.

of \$1 billion in 2012, with 25,000 products. Its projections are for \$1.5 billion in sales, with 33,000 products, by May 31.

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