



CHARLOTTE COUNTY
Economic Development

WEEKEND WAVE

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Friday Economic Roundup

WMU receives tentative OK to start aviation program here

By GARY ROBERTS Staff Writer

PUNTA GORDA - Western Michigan University is a step closer to establishing pilot training and other programs in Charlotte County after securing a provisional license.

In a unanimous vote Wednesday, the seven-member Florida Commission for Independent Education granted contingent approval for WMU to have a "physical presence" in the Sunshine State, clearing the runway for the aviation program to land at Punta Gorda Airport.

"It was a big step forward," said Denis Wright, president of Florida SouthWestern State College's Punta Gorda campus, which is partnering with WMU.

Provisional licensure is good for one year and will be reviewed annually for five years. After that period, WMU can qualify for a permanent license.

A letter will be sent to WMU within a month, formally detailing the relatively minor contingencies that must be met. The commission has asked WMU to provide a student career-services plan, some additional financial information and to clarify its application and enrollment process.

If these conditions are satisfied, a provisional license would be issued.

WMU officials are hesitant to comment until the license is in hand, but Dawn Gaymer, associate provost for extended university programs, said everyone involved is encouraged. "We intend on satisfying the contingencies and continue to appreciate the Charlotte County and FSW support that we have experienced," she said.

The WMU aviation program, with 775 undergraduate students, is one of the largest in the nation, occupying 92,000 square feet of building space at the W.K. Kellogg Airport in Battle Creek, Mich.

With the provisional license, WMU can establish a satellite facility in Charlotte County for aviation training, along with other programs such as interdisciplinary health, a graduate-level nursing program, and university studies, a bachelor's-completion program for adults.

"Western Michigan is committed to being a partner in developing a skilled workforce and collaborating with our local educational institutions, including Florida SouthWestern State College and Charlotte County Public Schools, to create pathways for learning for residents of Southwest Florida and developing the workforce pipeline necessary to attract new employers and companies to Charlotte County," said Lucienne Pears, Charlotte County director of economic development.

While there are more than 90 collegiate and vocational avionics programs in Florida, including the largest in the world at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, state colleges generally contract with private flight schools to provide actual in-flight education. WMU would operate its own flight training, with the closest collegiate program located in Tampa Bay.

Local students also will now have access to a comprehensive aviation program, available at Florida-resident tuition rates, even for online courses.

"If a Port Charlotte High School student wants to be a pilot, what a great opportunity this is," Wright said. "We now have this partner who can give students training right in their own backyard."

With the close collaboration of FSW, the aviation program will soon offer both two- and four-year degrees in pilot and maintenance technician training.

FSW already has approved a lease agreement with WMU for the use of four classrooms and four offices on its Punta Gorda campus, as well as other resources. In addition, WMU will have its own prominent sign, located off Airport Road on the Punta Gorda campus, announcing its presence.

"That's the commitment of our partnership as we move forward," Wright said.

Just down the road, Punta Gorda Airport will provide essential hangar space for flight training. WMU officials have said they expect to move staff down here in time to start flight training classes in the fall for about 50 students.

The startup of the airplane maintenance program also is just around the corner. All remaining hurdles - Federal Aviation Administration certification, airport hangar space and airline donations of engines and out-of-service aircraft to work on - could all be achieved in short order, Wright said.

"I could see us having something off the ground by January," he said.

However, housing WMU students remains a major issue. Affordable apartments in Punta Gorda are limited and the FSW Punta Gorda campus does not have student dormitories, so new housing will be needed.

"That's our biggest challenge," he said. "I think long-term somebody is going to have to build something."

FSW has offered land to contractors to make construction more financially feasible, but only students could live there, severely limiting the pool of potential renters.

"There are intermediate steps being taken right now to find space, but it is difficult," he said. "It's difficult, but not impossible."

Bright picture for Charlotte real estate market

By RUSTY PRAY Sun Correspondent

Life is good in residential real estate in Charlotte County.

Demand, construction and sales are up. Inventory and interest rates are nice and low.

"The residential market is definitely in an expansion mode," said Maryann Mize, senior vice president of Charlotte State Bank & Trust. "We have Realtors hungry for listings. Homebuilders are busy."

Mize spoke this week on the trends governing local residential and commercial real estate markets during a Charlotte County Chamber of Commerce event.

Her presentation included a slide of area real estate trends. The local residential market rested comfortably in the Phase 2, or expansion, quadrant of the graphic.

"Residential real estate is a leading indicator," she said. "Commercial is quick on the heels with great things in store."

She cited the planned expansion of Cheney Brothers in Punta Gorda, ongoing development in the Parkside neighborhood Port Charlotte, and the construction of Billy Fuccillo's Kia dealership in Charlotte County at the border with North Port as prime examples of commercial growth.

"The real estate environment is looking up," she said.

According to figures recently released by Florida Realtors, closings on single-family home sales were up by about 11.5 percent in 2015 from the previous year in the Punta Gorda metropolitan statistical area, which covers Charlotte County. The median price of a home in Charlotte rose to \$168,950 from \$146,000 just a year earlier.

Condo sales experienced a similar upswing, with closings up by 7 percent in 2015 from 2014. The median sale price for a condo in Charlotte rose 17 percent from \$119,000 in 2014 to \$140,000 in 2015.

"The market is white hot," Mize said.

Marianne Lilly of Re/Max Harbor Realty had an opportunity to experience that market first-hand. She has been in the business for 45 years, the last 12 in direct sales.

"It was an excellent season," Lilly said. "It's not as hot as it was in 2004 and 2005, when it peaked, but it definitely was a very good season."

"On the quadrant, she showed us prices were increasing. I believe we're not at the top."

Charlotte continues population increase

By JONATHAN SCHOLLES Staff Writer

PORT CHARLOTTE - Much like its neighboring communities, Charlotte County continues to notice solid growth; a steady climb it's been prepping for.

The county, according to recently released data from the U.S. Census Bureau, had a population spike of nearly 3 percent, rising 4,641 residents to a total population of 173,115. Estimates a year ago placed the population at 168,474. It has a median household income of \$44,265.

Port Charlotte, the county's largest community, had a population of 54,392 people at the time of the 2010 census.

Punta Gorda, which has a population of 18,150 and also noticed a 3 percent population spike over the last year, has the highest median household income in the county at \$56,081.

"We expect that steady 3 percent growth each year," said Julie Mathis, the executive director of the Charlotte County Chamber of Commerce, adding a large, sudden spike may cause issues.

"We're gearing up for growth," she added.

The county, Mathis said, is in need of trade workers to build the homes needed to satisfy the yearly spurts. She noted that the county is working on road projects in "anticipation of growth."

That seems to be a common theme.

The Florida Commission for Independent Education a week ago granted contingent approval for Western Michigan University as it pushes to add an aviation program at Punta Gorda Airport.

With 775 undergraduate students, WMU's aviation program is one of the largest in the nation. The university is partnering with Florida SouthWestern State College.

Along with WMU potentially flying into town, Mathis said, the Port Charlotte Town Center mall is seeking new vendors and other commercial opportunities are planned throughout the city.

An affordable waterfront community, Port Charlotte, as well as Charlotte County, capitalizes on northerners opting to move.

With a thriving real estate market, Mathis said, "People are selling their homes up north and making plans to move down."

North Port population expands by 3.2%

By JONATHAN SCHOLLES Staff Writer Charlotte Sun

NORTH PORT - One of the state's fastest-growing cities is showing no signs of slowing.

North Port, according to 2015 United States Census Bureau data, has noticed a 3.2 percent increase from the previous year and now boasts a population of 62,345 residents.

Going along with that, the city has experienced a 5.3 percent growth since 2010 and now has more than 27,500 households.

Its median household income is \$50,855.

"We're one of the fastest-growing metro areas in the nation; not just Florida," said Ruth Buchanan, the city's economic development program manager. "It's crazy."

With 105 square miles, North Port also features one of the largest geographies in state. And it still has plenty of room to grow as just 25 percent of the city is developed.

The rapid growth, though, is not without its share of stressors. City officials agree that with 270,000 buildable lots, including ones already developed, another population boom is imminent.

The following is a list of challenges North Port will face as it braces itself for future growth.

Attracting value-added jobs

North Port residents, on average, commute 23 minutes to work daily, a Forbes reports indicates.

Thinking among city administration has it that value-added jobs, which allow people to live in and work in the same community, will promote a higher quality of life and boost its economy.

Currently, the city is pushing for increased retail space, keeping up with the market demands and hoping in turn that will lure increased industry to the area.

Less than 5 percent of the workforce is geared toward industry, which includes light manufacturing.

In 2010, a large aerospace manufacturer was eyeing North Port as its possible home. Before doing so, though, it had a couple of concerns; one being lack of restaurants.

Then, a couple of years later, Hertz considered adding a call center to North Port, but similar concerns were raised.

"Venice and Port Charlotte are getting all of our spending," Buchanan said.

Buchanan said that retail is the answer to bringing in industry and boosting the local workforce.

"The gestation period for retail is much shorter than industry," Buchanan said. "We're getting ourselves ready and making ourselves attractive to incoming industry. But it takes time."

Although, the city also wants to ensure that incoming industry supports healthy lifestyles, meaning large smokestacks are less than ideal.

"I would love to see another industrial park and I think that fits in," said Michele Norton, the city's planning manager at Neighborhood Development Services, adding that potential homes for industry are Yorkshire Street near Interstate 75 as well as locations on Toledo Blade and Sumter boulevards.

"Plus so many companies start off small - even in a garage - and then grow," she added. "The pieces of the puzzle are starting to come together; you can see that transition. But we're still a young city and we need to find that balance to be sustainable in the future."

Buchanan said that it's important for the city to be smart with its workforce.

"We have a lot of people here and training our workforce to match targeted industry will help bring in the most money," Buchanan said.

Infrastructure needs

The city has already invested a lot in its infrastructure, spending roughly \$250 million over the years as part of its economic development plan. Improvements to infrastructure, though, are a continuous thing, especially in a growing city where improvements and repairs are commonplace.

In updating its infrastructure, the city took on two debts; it's only two, according to Buchanan. One debt was to widen Sumter Boulevard while the second was a road bond, passed on 60 percent approval by residents, that aids in repairs.

With 65,000 vested and plotted lots, Norton said, another population boom is coming. When and if the city ready, though, are the looming questions.

In the nine-year stretch ending in 2009, North Port noticed 16,290 homes built, while the four years after, just 1,104 were developed.

During the boom, the city did all it could to keep up with infrastructure needs. After the tizzy was over, it then had time to regroup.

"People move here from big cities and love the fact they're not taxed as much," Buchanan said, adding North Port doesn't have the infrastructure, airports and other amenities as a 200-year-old city. "We're still a new city."

Shaking her head, Norton said she's heard the complaints regarding a lack of a downtown numerous times. And Buchanan points to a downtown sector as something that "Happens organically," adding "You don't just build a downtown."

What the city does have, though, is eight distinctive activity centers; each complete with its own unique architecture and design. The centers, built for mixed use, are located strategically throughout the city and, oftentimes, offer amenities typically found in a downtown setting.

In the 1960s, General Development Corporation, once the largest real estate developer in the state, gobbled up lots of land, establishing nine new communities, including North Port and Port Charlotte, that promoted Florida homes.

GDC handled the construction of all roads, sewers and water plants, as well as golf courses and marinas.

"General Development didn't build roads the right way and now we have to fix it," Buchanan said.

Lack of full-service hospital

Sarasota Memorial Hospital North Port Emergency Room offers emergency, imaging, lab and rehabilitation services, as well as local physician offices that are peppered throughout the city. However, despite a growing population, the city is without a full-service hospital. Norton said this topic is the, "Elephant in the room that needs to be addressed."

"We have to plan for it and can't ignore it," Norton said. "We need a hospital and have to make it a focus and then be diligent."

The health care industry, she added, fits in well with the city's vision for growth. It also would attract more skilled workers, including doctors and nurses, to the area.

Neighboring Port Charlotte, Punta Gorda, Englewood and Venice have a combined five hospitals. Each has a smaller population than North Port.

FLORIDA ECONOMIC NEWS

- Florida unemployment figures fall in April ([Florida Times-Union](#))
- Citi relocating more jobs to Tampa, this time from Connecticut ([Tampa Bay Times](#))
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- Sarasota Chamber president leaving job ([Sarasota Herald-Tribune](#))
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- Why did cutting edge businesses like Shipt, Drizly and Carvana choose Tampa Bay? ([Tampa Bay Times](#))

US ECONOMIC NEWS

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- Corporate America Chases the Mythical Millennial ([NY Times](#))
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