



CHARLOTTE COUNTY
Economic Development

WEEKEND WAVE

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Friday Economic Roundup

AREA NEWS

Airport traffic sets record

By BRENDA BARBOSA STAFF WRITER CHARLOTTE SUN

PUNTA GORDA - Passenger traffic at the Punta Gorda Airport soared in 2014, nearly doubling from the prior year, airport officials announced Friday.

According to the Charlotte County Airport Authority, passenger counts increased a whopping 88 percent over 2013 numbers to a record 628,075 total passengers in 2014. In December, the airport saw a total of 63,051 passengers, or a 24 percent increase over last December's count.

Since the restoration of commercial air service in the fall of 2007, there have been more than 1.9 million travelers arriving or departing from the airport, according to officials.

Airport Authority Executive Director Gary Quill credits low ticket costs, as well as an improving economy, for the spike in traffic.

"The key thing is that we have an ultra low-cost carrier," Quill said, noting that the average cost of a round-trip ticket from Punta Gorda was about \$130 on Allegiant Air. "Our strategy is keep costs low. It's an ultra low-cost airport for an ultra lowcost carrier."

Last year, the airport spent about \$220,000 in marketing, Quill said. Punta Gorda partners with Allegiant to advertise in markets outside of Florida.

More than half the dollars were used to reimburse Allegiant for radio, television and print ads, as well as online advertising.

Still, the most effective marketing is Allegiant's rock-bottom prices.

"That's what drives traffic to the airport: cost," Quill said.

In 2014, the airport saw an increase in passenger traffic as a result of Allegiant's aggressive expansion in the Northeast and Midwest.

Allegiant Air now flies from Punta Gorda to 23 cities across the country.

"The Charlotte County Airport Authority is pleased to contribute to the economic growth of the community," authority chairman Paul Andrews said.

FPL generates \$22.3 million from sale of DeSoto land

By Michael Braga , Sarasota Herald-Tribune

Florida Power & Light sold 10,597 acres of land near its solar facility in DeSoto County to two companies controlled by Key Biscayne resident Alberto San Miguel for \$22.3 million, or \$2,100 per acre.

FPL still owns about 2,000 acres in DeSoto, including its 79-acre solar farm.

"Hopefully they'll use that land to expand their solar facility," said Mac Martin, owner of Marin Realty in Arcadia.

Martin said FPL's sales price was slightly higher than the \$1,800 per acre price paid for the Blue Head Ranch in Highlands County last year.

Located southwest of Lake Placid, Blue Head's 31,304 acres changed hands for \$56.4 million in November.

"Folks with acreage would like to get \$5,000 to \$6,000 per acre," Martin said. "But these deals demonstrate what people are willing to pay."

San Miguel used two companies to close his purchase.

French Golden Gate LLC bought 75 percent and Optimum Ranch Land LLC bought 24 percent.

Charlotte land purchased for conservation

By JIM TURNER THE NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA WRITER

TALLAHASSEE - A pair of land purchases approved Tuesday by Gov. Rick Scott and the state Cabinet were hailed by conservationists as a sign that a pulse is returning to the Florida Forever conservation program.

The Cabinet unanimously agreed to spend \$3.15 million to acquire 669-acres in Charlotte County to help restore the flow of freshwater to the Charlotte Harbor Aquatic Preserve, and \$9.77 million for 619 acres in Collier County that will provide additional buffering for the 13,000-acre Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary and the Bird Rookery Swamp.

Audubon Florida Executive Director Eric Draper, a lobbyist on environmental issues, said the deals are a sign that "the state of Florida is back in the business of conservation."

"We depend in Southwest Florida on a healthy environment," Draper said. "That's part of our economy down there."

Starting in 1991, lawmakers had consistently provided \$300 million annually for the Florida Forever and Preservation 2000 land-buying programs. But in recent years, funding has dried up as the state faced a series of tight budgets and Republican leaders expressed increasing concern over costs of managing the state's growing real estate holdings.

Funding for the purchases Tuesday were made by selling non-conservation parcels of land. The sales replaced a more controversial program that sought to raise the money by selling parcels the state has previously acquired for preservation.

Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam said funding for programs like Florida Forever should increase due to the 2014 voter-approved Florida Water and Land Conservation Amendment, which devotes a portion of real-estate taxes to conservation efforts, and the recovering economy.

Putnam added that there should be a mix of outright purchases of land for conservation and the purchase of development rights, which allow farmers and ranchers to continue to use their land while the state is able to keep those parcels from being built up.

"I believe the purchase of development rights achieves the same environmental benefits at greater savings to the state," Putnam said.

Putnam has requested \$25 million for the Rural and Family Protection Program, which is

used for development right deals.

Meanwhile, state lawmakers have started to break down how they will use money from the land and water conservation amendment, approved in November with 75 percent of the vote. The amendment requires that for the next two decades, 33 percent of the revenue from a tax on real-estate transactions, known as documentary stamps, go into conservation efforts, including Florida Forever.

Staff for the Senate Environmental Preservation and Conservation Committee last week projected the amendment will generate \$757 million for conservation efforts during the coming fiscal year, which begins July 1.

Since the amendment was approved, lawmakers have differed on how to define land-preservation and water-conservation projects, how the state should determine which of its "impaired" water bodies is most critical and how to approach the reduction of stormwater runoff and agricultural fertilizer use.

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- Florida's leading indicator up again ([Orlando Business Journal](#))
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- Florida venture capital doubled to \$862M in 2014 ([South Florida Business Journal](#))

US ECONOMIC NEWS

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