

WEEKEND WAVE

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Friday Economic Roundup

Construction in Punta Gorda booming

By BRENDA BARBOSA STAFF WRITER CHARLOTTE SUN

PUNTA GORDA - If there were any doubts the city has pulled through the great recession, look no further than the construction boom happening around town.

From single-family homes to restaurants and retail stores, the city is experiencing a resurgence of building activity it hasn't seen in years. And construction is about to pick up the pace.

Four new major construction projects are preparing to get underway this year, including:

- * a 52-unit apartment complex on W. Henry Street behind the Slip-Not bar and restaurant.
- * a 3,000-square-foot retail store at the corner of E. McKenzie and U.S. 41, across from the Dollar General.
- * a 7,700-square-foot auto parts store at 1202 Tamiami Trail.
- * a 60-unit mixed-income senior housing community.

"Construction has definitely picked up," said Punta Gorda zoning official Teri Tubbs. No doubt, the whirl of construction around the city has increased substantially in the last

12 months.

In 2014, for example, Punta Gorda issued a total of 108 building permits, 39 of which were issued for commercial build-outs, city building officials said. That represents an increase of more than 25 percent for commercial renovations and remodels from the 31 issued the previous year. This year, construction is anticipated to outpace that.

Just take a look at the U.S. 41 corridor between downtown and Airport Road. Last week, the small building at 1228 Tamiami Trail, which once housed a "gold store," was demolished to make way for a 3,000-square-foot Goodwill Industries of Southwest Florida bookstore and a small drive-thru lane for dropoffs, Tubbs said.

"It's going to be very small. It's not going to be for any large donations," Tubbs said.

One lot to the north, at 1202 Tamiami Trail, a new O'Reilly Auto Parts store is set to go up too, she said. O'Reilly Auto Parts purchased the .79-acre lot at the corner of Williams Street and Tamiami Trail where the former Pierce building used to be and plans to open a 7,700-square foot retail store this year.

"They've stepped up to the plate as far as what they are submitting," Tubbs said, noting that the company submitted elegantly designed plans for the new building.

A few blocks south on W. Henry Street, Naples-based developer Henry Street Advisors, LLC is gearing up to build a community of rental apartments on roughly 3 acres just behind the old Slip-Not. Oaks on Henry is one of two rental projects being built since 2007 when Charleston Cay in Port Charlotte was constructed.

The other rental project on tap for this year is The Verandas of Punta Gorda, a 60-unit senior housing community being developed by the Punta Gorda Housing Authority.

Norstar Development USA, PGHA's development partner, will design, engineer and build The Verandas, which will replace the senior housing units lost in Hurricane Charley. The estimated start date for the project is later this year. PGHA plans to follow up the completion of The Verandas with a second phase to bring the total number of senior units to 120.

After a long period of idleness, the recent flurry of construction activity is welcomed news to many in the housing industry, albeit with a touch of caution.

Longtime Realtor and Punta Gorda resident Lindsey Harrington is keeping a watchful eye on home sales and construction activity around town. He remembers when real estate shot to the top in 2005 and crashed a few years later.

"If we can keep this momentum up past the summer," Harrington said, "then this community will have really pulled through - permanently."

Turn students into entrepreneurs

By BRENDA BARBOSA STAFF WRITER CHARLOTTE SUN

A Young Entrepreneurs Academy information session will be held at 6 p.m. March 5 for students in grades 6-12, their families and local business people.

YEA! is a 30-week program that guides middle and high school students through launching and running their own real businesses or social movements. Applications are being taken for the 2015-2016 class of YEA!, which is offered by Leadership Sarasota of The Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce and by State College of Florida.

The free event is being held to tell people about the structure, curriculum and application process for the program. Business leaders can learn how to get involved as a mentor, guest speaker, field-trip host or an investor.

The application deadline is May 8.

The event will be at State College of Florida, 7131 Professional Parkway East, Lakewood Ranch, Rooms 116 and 117.

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.

Discussions continue with Western Michigan University

By BILL JONES SUN CORRESPONDENT

Leaders are closer to a decision to turn the abandoned Impac building in Punta Gorda into a southern hub for Western Michigan University and its area alumni, according to Charlotte County Economic Development Director Tom Patton.

In fact, the scope of the project also could be expanding beyond the initial plans that largely focused on aviation, Patton said at Wednesday night's Charlotte County Republican Club meeting at the Isles Yacht Club.

Western Michigan University President John Dunn and several of the university's deans, as well as area alumni, will be in town next week for another round of discussions, Patton said. The talks, first reported last year by the Sun, have been ongoing, both in Punta Gorda and at the university in Kalamazoo, Mich.

Patton said he feels they are getting close to a decision that could significantly expand the initial plans to establish a student pilot and technician training program involving the university's College of Aviation, Florida SouthWestern State College and Punta Gorda Airport.

He said new programs could involve fine arts and humanities, environmental engineering and medicine, with graduate students working with local physicians on programs to aid the county's senior citizens, dealing with conditions like vision problems and hearing loss.

The aviation program would be an excellent one, Patton said, but not enough, by itself, "to make it work."

A key ingredient in the expanded plans, Patton said, would be the university's ability to maintain close contact with some 1,500 alumni in Sarasota, Charlotte and Lee counties, and to bring in graduate students "to work with us."

Also, he said, Western Michigan would get the use of the Impac building, "a gorgeous education facility," without making capital investment. The building, which has been used for education in the past, is located near Fishermen's Village off Retta Esplanade.

The aviation program would feature a two year program at Florida SouthWestern, followed by two years at Western Michigan, for a four year degree in aviation technology, as well as a pilot training program.

Salaries in the aviation technology field, Patton said, range from \$60,000 to \$120,000 a year.

The pilot training program would need a hangar at the airport, Patton said, but the Impac building could house flight simulators. The program could have up to 50 pilots training in a 14-month program by next summer.

"We need more pilots," Patton said.

The area would benefit from the economic impact of Western Michigan staff living in the area - renting or buying, shopping and contributing to tax rolls, he said.

Patton said next week's Western Michigan visit will be a significant one for moving the project forward: "We're getting closer and closer. We're hoping for a decision. It would be a home run for us."

He also indicated a solution for the Murdock Village development problem is getting closer.

"All I can say right now is, 'hold onto your hats,'" he said of the long discussed commercial residential project.

In an interview, Patton added that there has been "more activity in the past two months than in the previous three years," adding that interest has gone beyond the "kicking tires" stage, to "interesting, qualified people, showing serious interest at present."

Aldi area hiring events set

By STAFF REPORT SUN CORRESPONDENT

NORTH PORT - The value grocery chain Aldi, under construction in North Port at the corner of Salford Boulevard and U.S. 41 near Perkins Restaurant, has scheduled regional hiring fairs for prospective employees.

The discount supermarket chain will open its doors in North Port with a 17,018-square-foot store featuring grocery store items like produce, dairy, meats and snacks at lower prices than more popular grocery chains, company officials say. A late summer opening is planned.

Aldi is looking to hire 20 employees for the North Port location and a new store in Bradenton, according to supermarket representatives, who state in a release that Aldi is "known for offering wages and benefits that are higher than the national average for the retail industry."

The hiring fairs will take place Wednesday at Country Inn and Suites, 24244 Corporate

Court, Port Charlotte; and March 12 at Holiday Inn Express in Venice, 380 Commercial Court. Both events run from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Applicants must be 18 years or older and hold a minimum of a high school diploma or GED. Retail experience for applicants is preferred. Possible positions include store associate (pay begins at \$11.25 per hour), shift manager (\$15.25 per hour) and manager trainee (with a starting salary of about \$43,680).

Applicants must be available to work anytime between 6 a.m. and 11 p.m. Monday through Sunday, and submit to a drug screening and background check. They also have to be able to lift 45 pounds.

Staff working at least 25 hours a week receive full health insurance, dental coverage and 401K, the release states.

Aldi operates nearly 1,400 U.S. stores in 32 states, primarily from Kansas to the East Coast. For more information, go to www.aldi.us.

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