

# WEEKEND WAVE

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## Friday Economic Roundup

### Counties eye visitors center Proposed Charlotte County site just off I-75

By GARY ROBERTS CHARLOTTE SUN STAFF WRITER

EAST OF PUNTA GORDA - At a recent summit meeting of officials from six Southwest Florida counties, the Charlotte delegation broached the subject of turning the former Jones Loop rest area on Interstate 75 into a regional visitors center, directing tourists to local points of interest.

The group's reaction was immediate and enthusiastic.

"It's a great idea," said Sarasota Commissioner Charles Hines, who attended the summit. "It's the perfect location.

As a group, we fully supported Charlotte County moving forward with it."

For a case in point of what could be accomplished, local officials only have to look to Polk County.

For more than a half-century, visitors to Florida have been greeted with information, maps and a free glass of citrus juice at one of the five official Welcome Centers, all located along the Sunshine State's northern border.

So when Polk wanted to open its own visitors center in 2007, it was considered a radical concept. But planners said the proposed location, just seven miles from Disney World, would capitalize on the throngs of tourists already passing by on Interstate 4.

Since its debut, the Outpost 27 Tourist Information Center has generated more than \$40 million in economic impact, said Justin Laferriere, visitor services manager for Visit Central Florida, Polk County's tourism arm.

Staffed by county employees, the visitors center averages 50,000 people annually, and continues to grow, he said. In addition, a discount ticket sales program on Florida attractions grossed more than \$1 million in sales last fiscal year.

Meanwhile, Pasco and Brevard counties are both working toward building visitors centers. There is a cautionary tale as well, however. On the same bustling I-4 corridor where Polk County struck tourism gold, Osceola County came up empty.

Last April, FDOT offered Osceola and the Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau a chance to lease land for free to set up a visitors center at a rest stop near Sea World. While Osceola jumped at the opportunity, the Orlando/Orange CVB didn't support the proposal, prompting FDOT to withdraw its offer.

It seems FDOT prizes cooperation over competition when it comes to visitors centers.

When FDOT first announced in November that the Jones Loop rest area would be shut down, Charlotte officials immediately envisioned a visitors center that would advertise the area's natural resources to traffic drawn from I-75 as well as Punta Gorda Airport.

But recently, FDOT told county officials the price tag - at first assumed to be nominal - could amount to \$9 million. Consequently, a coalition of counties was sought.

And, understanding the mutual benefits of a highly visible Southwest Florida Visitors Center, area officials are ready to hop onboard.

"They realize that, regionally, we have a unique opportunity," said Charlotte Commissioner Ken Doherty, who pitched summit attendees. "The collective population would benefit."

Indeed, there is strength in numbers. With a combined population of 1.7 million people, the six counties all have plenty to offer, and much to gain.

Boasting a number of tourist destinations - from beaches to local attractions to agricultural products - the goal is to enhance the visitor experience in Charlotte, Sarasota, Collier, Lee, Hendry and Glades counties.

FDOT will close the exit 161 rest area in April, concluding the daily count of 750 visitors wasn't enough. But that figure becomes more impressive when seen through the prism of tourist spending.

The 20-acre site includes three buildings, including restrooms and a convenience kiosk, plus about 100 parking spaces. In addition, there is plenty of land for other uses, such as festival events or a weekly farmers Market as is done in Polk County.

FDOT will retain five acres of the site for stormwater retention when I-75 is widened, reducing usable space to about 15 acres.

Charlotte, which has already formally expressed interest in the rest area, will continue to take the lead on the project. A decision by FDOT on a future course for the rest area is expected as soon as next month.

Billy Hattaway, FDOT District 1 secretary, clarified that the property has been appraised at \$9 million, but the sale price is negotiable. If the site is advertised for sale, public use would be just one factor to consider, he said, adding, FDOT is not willing to give the land away.

"We have the option of selling the property at market value. We have to consider a return for the taxpayer," Hattaway said. "We would put the money back in our road program, potentially for another rest area."

FDOT is currently exploring the feasibility of establishing a rest area next to the I-75 weigh station three miles south at Tuckers Grade, he said. This "hybrid model" would be a new prototype and is still under study, he said.

If Charlotte's plan to purchase the rest area is accepted, the financial details must still be worked out among the different counties.

"That's going to require further discussion," Hines said.

## BY THE NUMBERS

### Survey says: We disagree

By BRIAN GLEASON CHARLOTTE SUN EDITORIAL PAGE EDITOR

Charlotte County Economic Development Director Tom Patton made the rounds of a baker's dozen political, community, business and advocacy groups in recent weeks, polling members on a range of topics, including taxes, water quality and, of course, economic

development. The results of the poll provide insight into the overall mood of the county's joiners - folks who actively belong to organizations - and the wide gap in their views.

For example, in response to the question, "Which office of government functions most effectively?" 53 percent of the 607 participants said local, and 38 percent said none. But 79 percent of Team Punta Gorda members and 73 percent of Enterprise Charlotte Economic Council members said local, while 84 percent of Punta Gorda Tea Party members said none.

The same divide was evident when Patton asked how people voted on the extension of the local-option 1 percent sales tax. While 57 percent of all respondents said yes, 82 percent of Punta Gorda Tea Party members and 85 percent of Punta Gorda Concerned Citizens members said no. In contrast, 83 percent of ECEC, 79 percent of Englewood Florida Chamber of Commerce and 74 percent of Punta Gorda Chamber of Commerce members said yes.

Regarding the "overall direction of the county," there was broad agreement among members of the Charlotte County and Englewood chambers that we are going in the right direction, but Punta Gorda chamber members were split. A combined 83 percent of Charlotte chamber members responded good or excellent, while 94 percent of Englewood chamber members said good or excellent. Only 54 percent of Punta Gorda chamber members replied good or excellent, and 46 percent said fair or poor. Perhaps not surprisingly, Team Punta Gorda members' responses closely matched their chamber neighbors, with 57 percent saying good or excellent, and 43 percent fair or poor.

There appears to be support for nascent efforts to explore the incorporation of Port Charlotte. Overall, 27 percent of respondents favored incorporation, but another 51 percent said it depends how it is structured. The most opposition came from members of the South Gulf Cove Homeowners Association, 47 percent of whom said no, while the highest level of support came from members of the Punta Gorda Concerned Citizens, 69 percent of whom said yes, and nobody answered no. There is no group that represents a broad cross-section of Port Charlotte residents, so Patton's survey doesn't provide a sneak preview of any future cityhood vote.

Patton is a vocal proponent of expanding business-recruitment investment. He should be pleased with support he received from business and community groups, with 64 percent of all respondents saying the county needs to be more aggressive with incentives. Despite that support, though, Patton's survey serves as a reminder that nothing to do with government is ever unanimous.

## Halfacre working in Hillsborough

Halfacre Construction Co., of Sarasota, has been hired by the Hillsborough County School Board to build a modular project at a Tampa school.

Under a continuing contract agreement with the School Board, Halfacre will build six modular classrooms and associated facilities to convert Tinker Elementary into a kindergarten-through-eighth grade school. The work is set to begin in May and be completed in August.

Halfacre has done more than 200 projects for Hillsborough schools over the past eight years.

## An expanded berth to expand employment

By Michael Pollick Sarasota Herald-Tribune

MANATEE COUNTY - For politicians, ports are all about economic development and the jobs that they create.

So on Wednesday, when it was time for a ribbon-cutting on Berth 14, a recently expanded dock at Port Manatee, Gov. Rick Scott was on hand to talk jobs.

This one port, Scott told the gathered crowd of officials and reporters, already is responsible for supporting 24,000 jobs in the region. Like other people, Scott said he foresees many more jobs to come as Port Manatee begins handling increased trade through the newly expanded Panama Canal, with Mexico and, eventually, with Cuba.

"We've invested \$800 million in our ports over the last four years," Scott said, adding that Florida government pitched in \$3.3 million on the expanded berth and an adjacent intermodal shipping yard in Manatee County.

At the governor's side was Port Manatee executive director Carlos Buqueras, who continues to market the port and the adjacent industrial acreage as an underused gem with easy access through Interstates 275 and 75 to the rest of Florida and the eastern United

States.

"At the end of the day, ports are all about economic impact," Buqueras said.

### **The new, bigger dock**

Later, Scott cut the ceremonial ribbon on the port's recently extended dock space.

That berth used to be called Berth 12 but was re-christened Berth 14.

Now 584 feet longer than before, this one space has its own stretch of 1,600 feet of concrete waterfront.

Work on the berth started in 2012, under a \$13 million contract with American Bridge Co.

To make it as useful as possible, the project also included a recently completed 10-acre paved intermodal shipping yard, which can eventually be expanded to 52 acres. The port uses portable cranes to load and unload there.

Among the first to add service via the new berth is World Direct Shipping of Palmetto, which began in November to run its own container ship on a weekly schedule between Port Manatee and Coatzacoalcos in southern Mexico.

When World Direct started, neither Port Manatee nor Coatzacoalcos had any regularly scheduled container-ship service.

Port Manatee has handled containerized shipments for several years, but not through a scheduled service-for-hire that a business could use when needed to move its own goods.

"We just saw an opportunity there," said Carlos Diaz, World Direct Shipping director of operations. "Our vision, we want to create a new gateway between Mexico and the U.S."

### **Another client**

Another client looming on the horizon for the port is Air Products & Chemicals, now working on several multimillion-dollar liquified natural gas heat exchangers that will start making their way from the nearby plant onto ships in the fall of 2016.

When put in place, the heat exchangers become a core element in what could easily be a billion-dollar LNG production plant.

"This new berth certainly expands our ability to ship," said Alexander "Sandy" McLaughlin, general manager for Air Products' global LNG division.

Each of the heat exchangers being built at the Air Products plant is 150 to 180 feet long, 15 feet in diameter and weighs up to 500 tons.

"They look like rockets," McLaughlin said.

## **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](http://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.

## **FLORIDA ECONOMIC NEWS**

- New York venture capital firm eyes South Florida expansion ([South Florida Business Journal](#))
- Florida ranks No. 6 for video game development ([Orlando Business Journal](#))
- Florida online job listings reach all-time high ([Orlando Sentinel](#))
- Wawa and Whole Foods coming to University Parkway ([Sarasota Herald-Tribune](#))
- Florida's job growth up 7.6% in February ([Tampa Bay Times](#))
- Gov. Scott heading to California in jobs push ([AP](#))

## **ENTREPRENEUR NEWS**

- Don't let a bad employee hold your business hostage ([Jerry Osteryoung](#))
- How short-term viral hits can transform a small business ([AP](#))
- Women's Business Center opens in Orlando ([Bright House Networks](#))

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