

# WEEKEND WAVE

5-22-15



## Friday Economic Roundup

### 'Here We Grow Again'

#### FGCU forum foresees building boom in Charlotte

By GARY ROBERTS STAFF WRITER CHARLOTTE SUN

FORT MYERS - A home-building explosion is about to ignite in Charlotte County, real estate experts said Friday at a "Future of Development" conference on the Florida Gulf Coast University campus.

Rick Dalton, executive vice president for KB Home, said he might not know exactly when or where it will take place, but the resuscitated construction activity seen in neighboring counties soon will find its way to Charlotte.

"It's definitely coming," he said. "Charlotte County has been discovered."

There is no better example of this anticipated building boon than Babcock Ranch, believed to be the largest master planned community in the country set to break ground. With a projected 19,500 homes on 18,000 acres, this sustainable community will begin to take shape by early next year, said Al Dougherty, senior vice president for developer Kitson & Partners.

"It's extremely exciting to be on the cusp of launching Babcock Ranch," Dougherty told a roomful of real estate professionals at the Urban Land Institute-Southwest Florida District Council's final session of its "Here We Grow Again" series in Fort Myers.

Friday, representatives from Charlotte County examined the current development trends in their home county.

In the first phase of the mammoth Babcock Ranch development off State Road 31 in east county, upward of \$50 million will be spent on 300 single- and multifamily units, a lakefront town square that comprises office and retail space, and an extensive walking and biking trail system through conservation areas, Dougherty said.

And this residential rebirth already may have begun.

In just the first three months of this year, Charlotte amassed 261 new-construction residential building permits, or almost as many as all of 2011 (272), and almost half of last year's total (593). Commercial construction also is soaring, with 24 permits obtained from January through March, compared with 13 in 2014.

Dalton said KB Home, which has three active residential communities in Punta Gorda, is seeing an influx of traffic from neighboring counties and Florida's east coast. These potential home buyers are generally seasonal, older (ages 65-79), and wanting to take advantage of the area's affordability and quality of life.

"There's a lot of value offered in Charlotte County," he said. "We're getting a lot more affluent buyers now."

There are other harbingers of economic growth as well.

Passenger counts at the Punta Gorda Airport continue to set records, with 218,373 passengers during the first quarter of 2015. Last year, an unprecedented 628,075 passengers used the airport.

Besides bringing visitors to the area, the 4,300-acre economic enterprise zone around the airport is ready to welcome new businesses. Already designated and approved for light industrial development, the shovel-ready airport park has laid claim to a new distribution center and regional warehouse for Cheney Brothers, now under construction.

"We're getting ready for this wave of manufacturing and distribution that we're expecting at our airport," said Tom Patton, economic development director for Charlotte County.

Another stimulus for economic growth is the recently approved six-year extension of the local-option sales tax. A total of about \$110 million in revenue is expected to fund 20-plus projects, including needed infrastructure and civic projects.

Andy Stultz, president of the Enterprise Charlotte Economic Council, a privately funded group that actively supported the 1 percent salestax drive, said this building program is essential.

"This is critical to the overall future of the county," he said. "We're trying to grow the economic base in Charlotte County with good, above average-paying jobs."

All of which adds up to a lot of construction activity in the coming years. Charlotte County Commission Chairman Bill Truex lauded the mix of public and private initiatives that will benefit everyone.

"It's been a very concerted effort," he said.

One negative brought out at the conference, however, is the continued lack of skilled workers in the area. Education is the only way to fill the demand for manufacturing and high-tech jobs.

"We need a workforce," Patton said. "Without the workforce, it's impossible to recruit a business."

## Census: Charlotte, Punta Gorda see population bumps

By ALLISON SHIRK STAFF WRITER CHARLOTTE SUN

The U.S. Census Bureau released 2014 population estimates this week, and they show Charlotte County reached a total population of 168,474 people last year - a 5.3 percent jump over 2010's estimate of 159,978.

The city of Punta Gorda followed suit with its own 5.7 percent rise to 17,596 estimated residents in 2014, over 2010's 16,641, the numbers show.

According to the bureau, census figures are measured from July to July of each year, and the released estimates are from July 2013 to July 2014.

Nearby, ever-growing North Port is believed to have reached a total population of 60,380 in 2014.

North Port officials and representatives said the 5.3 percent boost in population from 2010's estimate of 57,357 people to now is directly proportional to the increased building in the area, which also has attracted bigger commercial businesses to North Port in the last year. City Manager Jonathan Lewis said the affordability and availability of land is what reasonably could have attributed to the population growth.

"You have land availability, reasonable rates and a lot of people who choose North Port because of how it looks," he said Tuesday.

Sarasota County - of which North Port is a part - as a whole saw a population hike from 379,448 in 2010, to 396,962 in 2014, according to census data.

The city of Arcadia and its county - Desoto - saw modest gains as well, settling at 2014 estimates of 7,722 and 35,012, respectively.

Michele Norton, Planning Division manager for the city of North Port, said her city has a lot of families moving in, and there is a "steady" growth of people moving into the West Villages neighborhood, off U.S. 41 near State College of Florida.

As with all areas, where people move in, businesses also put down roots.

Bill Gunnin, executive director of the North Port Area Chamber of Commerce, said he has seen a significant increase of bigger, franchise businesses in North Port, including the additions of businesses such as Starbucks, First Watch and a Chico's Outlet that opened in the city within the last year. Aldi grocery and Richard's Foodporium are under construction, and Dunkin' Donuts is slated to be built near Price and Sumter boulevards.

"People are not just interested in North Port for residential living, but also for commercial businesses," Gunnin said. "Growth for home-based businesses never slowed down, and those will continue to grow."

## Microsoft plans grand opening, \$1M in tech grants

Provided by KELLY HATTON ABC-7

SARASOTA COUNTY - The new Microsoft store at the Mall at University Town Center will hold a grand opening celebration starting at 10:30 a.m. June 11.

The celebration will kick off with a ribbon cutting ceremony and a presentation of technology grants. Microsoft will be donating nearly \$1 million in grants to local nonprofit organizations, including Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium, Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Sun Coast, Girls Inc. of Sarasota County, Girl Scouts of Gulfcoast Florida and Children First.

Later in the evening, NFL football star Derrick Brooks will be joining the Microsoft celebration. The first 200 attendees of the celebration will have the opportunity to meet the hall of famer and play Xbox One with him.

Customers in attendance of the grand opening can also take advantage of special giveaways and one-day only product offers.

The mall is located at 140 University Town Center Drive, Sarasota.

## Florida Tracks & Trails opens full time this weekend

By CHARLES RUNNELLS NEWS-PRESS

Florida Tracks & Trails opened big last month with the sprawling CountryLife Music Festival, a three-day event that attracted thousands to the Charlotte County park and featured

famous country stars such as Reba McEntire and Big & Rich.

Now, a month later, Florida Tracks & Trails is about to open its gates again for outdoor adventurers in Southwest Florida and beyond.

Only this time, it'll be for good.

The 1,000-acre park opens this weekend for anyone who wants to play war in its 80-acre paintball park, zip around its 22 miles of dirt-bike and ATV tracks and trails, or just relax on its 12-acre manmade beach.

And after Memorial Day weekend, Florida Tracks & Trails will be open every week from Friday through Sunday.

Park co-manager Bjorn Rosinus looks forward to people finally enjoying the place every weekend. The CountryLife fest was the first time most people had even seen the \$17 million-\$20 million Florida Tracks & Trails.

"It was great to finally see people here," Rosinus says. "Because for the past several years, it's just been us out here working."

Park founder and co-manager Terry Cooke expects things to go more smoothly next weekend than they did during CountryLife. About 4,500 to 7,000 people flooded the park every day for the fest. And Cooke says it quickly showed the Florida Tracks & Trails staff which things worked and which things didn't.

Now Cooke says Florida Tracks & Trails employees are better able to handle whatever comes up.

"We want to grow fast and we want to be the best venue in the state of Florida," he says. "And in order to do that, we needed that (experience). I call it our stress test."

Some RV campers, for example, complained on Facebook and elsewhere about inadequate power in the park's festival-style RV campgrounds.

But Cooke says those grounds weren't handled by Florida Tracks & Trails. And, indeed, the park won't allow overnight camping anymore for the time being. The "festivalstyle" RV camping for CountryLife - organized by concert promoters Blu Entertainment Group and basically just powered by generators in a parking lot - has nothing to do with the high-quality RV campgrounds planned later for the park, he says.

Those upcoming RV campgrounds will feature permanent water, sewer and power hook-ups. Work could start on those grounds within the next 90 to 100 days, Cooke says. That and a planned zip line park are expected to open sometime in 2016 or 2017, according to the park website.

The first day of CountryLife was the most difficult, Rosinus says. But after CountryLife opened on April 24, most of the kinks got ironed out quickly.

"The first day was definitely a learning curve for most of the Florida Tracks & Trails staff," Rosinus says. "We knew we were going to have some issues.

"None of us had ever put on a concert of that caliber. But we got it pretty quick."

Dates have already been announced for the second annual CountryLife Music Festival in 2016. Tickets are going on sale soon for the Feb. 12-14 event, according to the CountryLife website. Bands haven't been announced.

And more concerts are coming to the park's 56-acre Event Lawn. A new concert series will start this October, Cooke says, adding that he's not ready to announce the bands yet.

In the meantime, the park's beach club will host deejays, local bands and some touring acts on Friday and Saturday nights.

A lot has changed in the weeks since CountryLife took place, Cooke says. The park's paintball and motocross pro shops will be open next weekend, and so will its general store. Plus the park's staff has a better idea of what it takes to run the place.

Cooke says his No. 1 priority has always been safety. The park has a fulltime medical and security staff, and a zero-tolerance policy for drinking and driving.

For example, guests are issued wristbands tied to their Florida Tracks & Trails accounts. And those accounts show if they've bought beer or other alcoholic drinks in the park (guests aren't allowed to bring in outside coolers, drinks or food).

If someone has bought alcoholic drinks, Rosinus says, a red light flashes at the entrance to the various tracks and trails, and that person isn't allowed to ride for the day.

"We're all about being family-friendly and safe," Rosinus says. "That's a big priority for us."

The park has a staff of about 25 permanent employees and about 10 part-time employees,

he says. That includes six fulltime lifeguards and safety and security workers trained in first aid.

Other safety features include a helipad for emergency medical evacuation and a designated track for emergency vehicles so they can quickly access any accidents.

Cooke says he can't take all the credit for the park and its safety measures. He says he got a lot of help from Charlotte County law enforcement, firefighters, zoning employees, commissioners and many more people throughout the county government.

"Every agency has just supported this from day one," he says, "And they literally aren't getting credit for all the things they've done."

"They are the reason that all this came true and that the dream came true."

## Sarasota-Manatee airport looks to broaden appeal

By Michael Pollick Sarasota Herald-Tribune

With \$20 million in renovations to be finished this summer, Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport's management now plans to tune up its outdoor signs.

The members of the Sarasota-Manatee Airport Authority also continue to give airport CEO Fredrick "Rick" Piccolo high marks for his management of the business, which is now running surpluses in excess of \$1 million per year.

Piccolo began running the airport in December 1995 and is now completing his 20th year in the job.

Under his leadership, Sarasota-Bradenton International has moved from having a heavy debt burden to being debt-free, with \$19 million in cash on its balance sheet.

At their quarterly meeting, authority members picked the Tampa design firm of Gresham Smith to come up with an overall signage plan for the terminal. This is the same firm that came up with the design work leading to the interior remodeling job.

The sign project could end up taking a couple of years and cost \$500,000, so it made sense to get the big picture before launching into it, Piccolo said.

The impetus for the project was the fact that the main entrance sign along University Parkway, which went up when the airport was built in 1989, is showing its age and needs to be replaced.

"With the development that has taken place around the airport, it is not as visible as it used to be," Piccolo said. The new entryway sign, he said, would likely be a "combination of something that is architecturally identifiable with this airport, along with some digital capability."

The Tampa firm will negotiate a contract with staff, then come back to the board for approval at its next regular meeting in August.

### **Reaching new customers**

Updating the signs leading travelers and friends through the airport fits in with a larger overall theme Piccolo set for his staff this year: finding ways to endear the airport more in the minds of potential customers.

Geographically, the airport is sandwiched between much bigger terminals in Tampa and Fort Myers, with other competition coming from St. Petersburg-Clearwater and Punta Gorda.

Sarasota International is "kind of a boutique airport," Piccolo said during his review with authority members. "We are the Fresh Markets or Whole Foods vs. the Publix."

Staffers surveyed each of the airport's 130 employees for ideas on how to improve the customer experience, then published the highlights as "Customer Service Strategy.... Creating the SRQ experience one idea at a time."

Ideas ranged from adding cell phone charging stations in the baggage-claim area to upgrading the area outside the east fence where people park their cars to watch airplanes as they land and take off.

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