



CHARLOTTE COUNTY
Economic Development

WEEKEND WAVE



Friday Economic Roundup

AREA NEWS

Area to German tourists: Willkommen!

By JOEL S. LANGHAM CHARLOTTE SUN CORRESPONDENT

The scene opens as an athletic, clean-cut man walks along a Charlotte County beach. He grins, removes his sunglasses, and speaks directly into the camera.

"Hallo, ich bin Heiko," he says.

That's German for "Hello, my name is Heiko." Heiko Obermöller, the video's host, then begins talking to his countrymen about Charlotte County. According to [imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) (the Internet Movie Database), Obermöller is an actor who has had roles in both television and film, along with voicing characters in video games. But why is he in a video promoting Charlotte County?

It seems Germans love Southwest Florida.

Visit Florida research indicates Germany is one of the top five countries from which international visitors come to enjoy Southwest Florida, according to Charlotte County Marketing Director for Tourism Chip Futch. The other countries are Canada, the United Kingdom, Brazil and Argentina. Argentina, in particular, is "growing very fast" as a source of local tourism, he added.

The promotional video, accessible on www.discoveramerica.com, a website owned by the public tourism company Brand USA, was produced by Miles Marketing Destinations in Sarasota, and was released in Germany just last year, Futch said. Obermöller begins the video with a description of Charlotte County as a "paradise for outdoor and nature lovers, in which there is a lot to discover." In the video he goes on a kayaking tour in Placida, and makes special mention of the 50 kayak trails found in the county. Futch noted that Germans especially value nature tourism, and said they love the state parks and environmental preserves in the area.

Futch said this is the first video of its kind to be released by the Charlotte Harbor Visitor & Convention Bureau. Germany has long been a "steady" provider of tourists, he said, and he hopes Portuguese and Spanish language promotionals for tourists from Brazil and Argentina will follow in the future. Another such German promotional already is being planned this year that will highlight downtown tourism, such as shops and restaurants, in Punta Gorda.

The presence of foreign tourists doesn't go unnoticed if you're at the right place at the right time.

Ed Hill, executive director of the Englewood Florida Chamber of Commerce, stumbled on a German couple enjoying the food and excitement at the Lock 'N Key restaurant during the World Cup this summer.

"Obviously, they were excited and proud that their team was making the final round," he said.

Hill's office receives phone calls and emails from prospective German visitors, and a few Germans even subscribe to the weekly newsletter circulated by the chamber, he said.

Beyond Charlotte, Sarasota County experiences a similar level of interest from German tourists. Lynn Bates, the communications manager at Visit Sarasota County, said Germany was second only to the United Kingdom in terms of visitors from foreign countries to Sarasota County. For the first three quarters of the 2014 fiscal year, Germans and other Central Europeans made up 27 percent of international visitors to the county, accounting for some 19,994 visitors.

Bates said a variety of publicity efforts are employed to attract Germans, including a promotional video produced a few years ago in German and British English language versions. VSC hopes to add a Spanish version of the promotional soon, she said.

Back in Charlotte County, Futch said the tourism office may work with Obermöller once again for the next video installment.

"We're leaning toward using him again, (he is) absolutely professional and personable," he said.

To view the Charlotte County video, go to <http://de.discoveramerica.com/travel-journals/charlotte-county-german.aspx>. To watch the Sarasota County video, visit <http://m.discoveramerica.com/usa/states/florida/cities/sarasota-county.aspx>.

Charlotte County home building starts to catch up

By DICK HOGAN FORT MYERS NEWS-PRESS

North of Cape Coral along the Burnt Store Road corridor, Charlotte County's slumbering

homebuilding industry is slowly rekindling.

"They're making a run for Lee County," Cape Coral-based Paul Homes co-owner Bob Knight said half-jokingly - he's noticed a lot more construction, for example, in Burnt Store Lakes just across the Lee County line.

The reasons aren't hard to see, he said: the rapidly advancing four-laning of the road along with the recent extension of impact fee cuts by Punta Gorda.

Bob Miller, vice president of Punta Gorda-based Boyette & Miller Construction & Development, does mainly commercial structures, but said he's noticed the change along Burnt Store.

"It's like holy cow, there's a lot going on here," he said, noting that single-family-home permits for the county are up sharply.

"I live in Burnt Store Isles on Macedonia Drive and in the last year 15 houses on my street were built," said Miller, who is president of the Charlotte County Building Industry Association.

Statistics support that observation: according to FGCU's Regional Economic Research Institute, 52 permits for single-family homes were pulled in July in Charlotte, 20 more than the 32 in July 2013.

Gary Jackson, director of the institute, said those numbers are part of a general uptick in residential construction in Southwest Florida. "Part of it is people feeling better about the economy: We're starting to see more confidence."

Randy Thibaut, CEO of Fort Myers-based Land Solutions, said that in particular Charlotte is benefiting economically from factors including Allegiant Air, which operates locally out of Charlotte County Airport.

Allegiant's discount flights to many Northern cities are starting to attract people who are willing to drive a few miles to save money over what they'd pay at Southwest Florida International Airport, he said.

The trend is likely to continue, Thibaut said, noting that the Charlotte airport "is going to be finishing up soon on an \$8 million expansion."

At a time when home prices across the region have been increasing steadily, Charlotte is in a good position to compete against the costlier Lee and Collier markets, he said.

"As our area (Lee) prices people out of the market, they'll go to Charlotte," Thibaut said. "The future of Charlotte County is that if you want to buy a house in Lee or Collier for \$200,000 or less, you're not going to be able to do that" for the most part.

In July, the median price for a single-family home sold with the help of a Realtor was \$179,900 in Lee County but only \$151,950 in Charlotte.

"We're starting to see people buying in south Charlotte County who are commuting to Fort Myers because in 20 minutes you can be from Burnt Store to Cape Coral."

One consequence of that is the recent flow of younger families into the Burnt Store area, attracted by lower prices and the newly widened Burnt Store Road that makes commuting possible.

The wider road is also keeping people from leaving Burnt Store as they age and become less willing or able to deal with the highway - known for years as a dangerous road, especially at night.

"Many of the more elderly people didn't want to traverse that road," said Robert Pietrasanta, president of the Burnt Store Lakes Property Owner's Association. "They moved to Punta Gorda and gave that as a reason."

But they're being replaced by younger families, he said, and Burnt Store Lakes is already gearing up to take advantage of that.

They're looking at adding a nature trail (also accessible to golf carts) as well as a soccer field to attract the new generation, Pietrasanta said - although bocce ball and pickleball courts are also on the table for older residents.

Gene Murtha, president of the Burnt Store Isles Association, said he's already noticing that more new arrivals in the community are younger families attracted by the lower prices compared to Lee. "Young people have found these houses a lot more affordable."

As Charlotte County grows, it likely will be through smaller new communities than those in Lee and Collier, Thibaut said. "You're not going to get the 3,000-unit communities."

Still, he said, the growth will come. "This is not short term, but long term."

Amazon's Ruskin center begins work

By Herald-Tribune

Nearly 1,000 employees have begun work at Amazon.com Inc.'s "fulfillment center" in southern Hillsborough County, and the company is still filling some positions, a spokeswoman said.

The employees are filling the shelves of the 1 million-square-foot facility with products, and shipments to customers should start in about a week, Nina Lindsay said.

It's the company's second huge distribution center in the area. One in Lakeland began shipping products last month. That center handles larger items such as TVs, while the Ruskin warehouse works

primarily with smaller items.

The jobs there start at about \$10.50 an hour. Applicants can apply at workatamazonfulfillment.com.

PGT's redesigned literature wins

By Herald-Tribune

PGT, the North Venice-based manufacturer of residential impact-resistant windows and doors, received Window & Door magazine's 2014 Crystal Achievement Award for Best Product Literature.

The company this year redesigned its consumer marketing materials and product support materials, including brochures, product guides, catalogs and quick reference guides for 13 product lines.

"We had two very simple, but important, goals in mind when developing our product literature: simplify the consumer's purchase decision and our dealers' selling process," said Todd Antonelli, PGT's vice president of sales and marketing.

"We're thrilled at the response we've received from both parties."

Winners were chosen by three panels of judges representing a cross-section of the window and door industry.

Passengers up 73% at Charlotte airport

By Herald-Tribune

Passenger traffic at the Charlotte County Airport in August was 38,744, up 73 percent compared with August 2013, the airport authority said. For the year through Aug. 30, 448,392 travelers passed through the airport's Bailey Terminal compared with 197,805 in the same period last year. Allegiant Air, the airport's only carrier, has nonstop service between the airport and 21 U.S. cities.

FLORIDA ECONOMIC NEWS

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- Florida job creation gets back on track in August ([Tampa Bay Times](#))
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- Embraer cuts ribbon on engineering and technology center ([Florida Today](#))
- GDP jumps across the nation ([South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#))
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