

POLICY STATEMENT
CHARLOTTE ASSEMBLY 1996

Sponsored by
The Charlotte County Board of Commissioners

Planned by
The Charlotte Assembly Steering Committee

Punta Gorda, Florida
June 6-8, 1996

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At the close of their discussion, the participants of this assembly reviewed and adopted as a group the following statement. The statement represents general agreement. However, no one was asked to sign it. Furthermore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to every recommendation.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Charlotte County is a place of natural beauty and Old Florida ambiance. It has the potential to prosper in many ways, and yet it also faces serious challenges. Residents are concerned that population growth may undermine the quality of life, that taxes may rise beyond some homeowners' ability to pay, that the local economy will not provide adequate wages or jobs, and that in other ways the community may deteriorate. If the county is to set its own course, rather than be blown by random winds, the citizenry must achieve greater unity of will and purpose.

B. It was with this aim that over one hundred persons participated in the Charlotte Assembly at Punta Gorda on June 6 - 8, 1996. The Charlotte Assembly 1996 was planned by a Steering Committee of 31 members with diverse backgrounds and interests. The Steering Committee selected participants to reflect many aspects of the county, including geography, business, government, civic groups, religion, minorities, retirees, youth, agriculture, the environment, education, and others. The questions covered at the Assembly, which were also developed by the Steering Committee, addressed the participants' vision for the county's future; infrastructure; economic development and redevelopment; environmental protection and growth

management; services; public finance; civic culture; and implementation. Following are the Assembly's conclusions and recommendations.

II. VISION

A. Charlotte County is a wonderful place to live, especially for retirees and families with young children. But the whole region of Southwest Florida has been changing because of rapid population growth. Between 1970 and 1990, Charlotte County's population expanded from less than 30,000 residents to over 110,000, which is almost a three-fold increase. The county has also been affected by major public investments in regional infrastructure, such as Southwest Regional International Airport and the completion of I-75. Recently, however, population growth has slowed dramatically, perhaps because, with the disappearance of General Development Corporation (GDC), Punta Gorda Isles, Inc., and other large developers, the area is no longer being marketed nationally and internationally. All of these changes in combination create both a threat and an opportunity.

B. In a sense, the county is at the edge of a precipice. Growth and development have not gone so far that they cannot still be channeled and shaped, but this may not be true much longer. Decisions today, or the failure to make decisions, will affect the character of Charlotte County forever. The key to prosperity in the future is maintaining Charlotte County's strengths, taking advantage of opportunities, and correcting the mistakes of the past by promoting environmentally sensitive and economically sound development.

C. The county's many strengths, listed in no special order, include:

1. Natural environment. The combination of Charlotte Harbor, the Peace River, the Myakka River, and Gulf beaches make Charlotte County a true “water wonder land” filled with natural beauty. Stately, old trees add to the area’s charm, as do the native habitat and open spaces which gives residents and visitors alike the chance to see the real Florida. The county’s natural environment is a resource of inestimable value. It is a joy in its own right, it provides numerous opportunities for sporting and recreation, and it positions Charlotte County to be a leader in Florida’s emerging high-growth industry of eco-tourism.

2. An active citizenry. The county has several groups of residents who participate actively in community and civic affairs. Retirees are very involved. Also active are business people and young people. Charlotte County has many volunteers. They help run the library, assist in the hospitals and schools, serve on advisory boards, and help deliver many social services. The spirit of volunteerism in Charlotte County deserves greater recognition and appreciation.

3. The quality of life. Charlotte County has a relaxed, family-friendly atmosphere. The community differs from other areas of Southwest Florida because of its low crime rate, moderate cost of living, and low population density. A wonderful climate adds to Charlotte County’s appeal to tourists and residents alike. Geographically, the county is close to both Sarasota and Fort Myers, and to two major airports.

4. Education. Charlotte County has good and expanding opportunities for education. The K-12 schools are safe places for our children and youth, and the instruction is solid. The Port Charlotte Cultural Center offers non-credit courses and other resources for life enriching courses and programs. The County has a vocational technical school, new Edison

Community College campus, and Florida Southern College's Charlotte/DeSoto Program. To the south, Florida Gulf Coast University is being built as an addition to the State University System.

5. Large areas of land in preservation. Examples include Webb-Babcock Wildlife Management Area, Charlotte Harbor State Preserve, Cedar Point, Tippicanoe Bay, and Charlotte Harbor Flatwoods.

6. A large agricultural community. This community raises cattle, citrus, and such row crops as potatoes, tomatoes, and green vegetables. Agriculture provides open space for water recharge and a rural atmosphere. Agriculture is a substantial part of the County's economy and helps diversify our economic base.

D. The county's most pressing challenges, listed in no particular order, include:

1. Population growth. This is a double-edged sword. Population growth can bring economic expansion, rising property values, and cultural and ethnic diversity. But uncontrolled population growth can also lead to traffic, crowded schools, environmental destruction, and an overall decline in the quality of life. The challenge is to develop policies for assuring that the natural environment is protected and that public services and facilities are maintained at acceptable levels.

2. Existing platted lands. Charlotte County contains about 200,000 vacant platted lots. In most cases, the subdivisions in which these lots are located were laid out in a grid pattern and did not allow for good drainage, waste water treatment, and sidewalks. Many Assembly participants, but not all, feel that if these subdivisions build out as they are currently designed, there will be a major--indeed, perhaps catastrophic--drain on the financial resources of overlying local governments, because they will generate relatively little in taxes compared to what they are

likely to require in services, road maintenance, and off-site facilities. Growth in most of these subdivisions simply will not pay its own way without a significant revision in the tax and fee structure. Furthermore, the subdivisions are very inefficient to serve. They are spread out over 215 square miles, thus requiring roads, water lines, and similar facilities to be extended incredible distances.

3. Political instability. Charlotte County has a high level of turnover among its elected officials. The county is also characterized as having difficulty in maintaining consistent policies. In large part, this instability stems from the community's fragmentation.

a. The most visible division is between some retirees and other residents. Many retirees are especially sensitive to governmental actions that may raise their taxes or change the community character. Other residents worry a vocal minority has too much influence and is an obstacle to needed economic progress. The magnitude of this division between the generations is a matter of opinion, but virtually everyone recognizes its existence.

b. The county is also fragmented geographically. Those in different parts of the county have different interests and sometimes resent paying for county wide services that they may use or need less than others.

c. As these various factions grapple with one another, local government is caught in the middle. Leaders find it difficult, if not impossible, to locate the middle ground and forge stable compromises.

4. Government by screaming. A handful of citizens with negative attitudes sometimes exercises an inordinate and destructive influence over the county government. These individuals and others like them came to Charlotte County expecting a paradise, but many feel

that they were exploited by big developers, and now they fear that rising taxes coupled with declining income may make it impossible for them to survive. The anxieties of individuals in these circumstances are understandable and deserve both sympathy and accommodation, but unfortunately they are being expressed in a manner that undermines the political process. This group sometimes addresses the Commission emotionally and without proper respect for either the Commissioners or for those in the community with differing opinions. This attracts media attention, which further distorts the political atmosphere of the county. Some County Commission meetings on significant issues should be changed to the evenings, so that working people will be able to attend. Also worth considering is conducting town meetings in different geographical locations. However, the needs of hard-pressed citizens should never be ignored. The aim should be to encourage them to play a constructive role in county politics, and this will require sensitivity and responsiveness to their legitimate concerns.

5. Limited economic base. The economy in Charlotte County provides only limited employment opportunities. Eighty-four percent of jobs in the county are in retail trade, services, or construction. Many of the jobs in these categories pay low wages. This has at least two unfortunate consequences.

a. It means that the tax base is heavily dependent on residential properties.

b. It also causes young people to begin to think, very early on in their lives, that they will need and want to move away when they are grown. They see the local economy as unable to provide decent careers, and this perception is reinforced when, as teenagers, they must compete with retirees for service jobs. The retirees are generally preferred because they are often perceived as more reliable and harder working.

6. Weak community attachment and identity. Many residents do not consider Charlotte County to be their home. Many factors contribute to this phenomenon, including the large number of transplants and seasonal residents, the bad experience with some developers, and the county's large unincorporated area. Residents identify with their neighborhoods but not with the county as a whole. Residents' lack of attachment to the county fosters a certain amount of selfishness and contributes to the political conflict and instability discussed above. It also makes it difficult for the community to forge a clear identity and transmit it to future generations, for a community's identity rests on its shared consciousness of its history and its goals. Somewhat related is the problem of negativism at public meetings. This rude, hostile, ugly behavior by a minority discourages others from participating. This Assembly urges public officials not to tolerate it.

E. Several opportunities, listed in no particular order, exist to help meet these challenges:

1. The Charlotte County Comprehensive Plan is being revised. This provides an important chance to implement the vision of this Assembly. The Plan should not simply be written and submitted for cursory public review and comment. This group and others should be deeply involved in the planning process from its inception.

2. The county has a growing health care industry. This might provide the base for attracting other light industries or creating spinoff opportunities for local entrepreneurs.

3. Charlotte County has a great deal of undeveloped land. The abundance of land makes it possible to construct regional facilities, establish commercial and industrial office parks, and create commercial pods in the residential areas. Even the platted subdivisions are not necessarily a drawback if they could be redeveloped. The County government could establish a

program for lot owners to trade their outlying lots for others located in designated growth areas. In the latter, the County could use zoning, tax incentives, and other mechanisms to foster the development of village-like communities, which would be largely self-sufficient because they would include not only residences but also businesses, schools, parks, etc.

4. The county contains a number of neighborhoods with strong identities and civic spirit. It might be possible to strengthen the civic culture of the county as a whole by building on this neighborhood foundation. It might also be possible to market these neighborhoods outside the county and state. The possibility of incorporation may enhance community identity.

5. I-75 just a few miles east of U.S. 41 links Charlotte County to the rest of the state. The interstate could become a major corridor for industry or for attracting tourists. Also, with appropriate signage, travelers could be enticed to enjoy the area's ecotourism opportunities. However, we need to keep in mind the necessity of protecting our natural environment.

6. Changes in technology, especially the growth of the Internet, may present significant opportunities. It is becoming less and less necessary to be located near large cities and institutions of higher education. Employees are increasingly working at home, large companies are beginning to establish satellite offices, and students are gaining access to degrees through what is being called "distance learning." The new Charlotte campus of Edison Community College and Florida Gulf Coast University to the south will contribute to this trend here, because the campuses will include facilities for distance learning.

7. There is a potential for industrial and manufacturing development in the county. The Charlotte County Airport and Industrial Park serve as an example.

8. The relatively early stage of the county's development is itself an opportunity.

Because the county is still in its infancy, its development can and should be guided and shaped.

9. The county's existing and expanding educational facilities are an important resource. They can educate and train the local labor force. This may improve the attractiveness of Charlotte County to employers considering locating in the area. It should also improve the quality of workers for businesses already here.

F. The participants in this Assembly have a progressive vision for Charlotte County's future. The hope is that the county's economy can be diversified, so that more and better jobs become available to young people and the tax burden is shifted away from residential property owners. The development of neighborhoods with their own identities should be encouraged. Bonding between generations should be fostered with mentoring programs, surrogate grandparent programs, and other ways of promoting interaction between age groups. Rigorous planning and innovative ideas will be necessary to prevent population growth and economic development from harming the environment and quality of life, and the anxieties of many of the county's citizens must be addressed if this vision is to be politically practical. But with a better tax base, Charlotte County should be able to expand its public services and facilities without unfairly burdening local homeowners. At the same time, as the county becomes more hospitable to businesses and provides better services to citizens, the population attracted to Charlotte County will probably become younger and more affluent, thus contributing to a cycle of gradually increasing prosperity and community spirit.

III. INFRASTRUCTURE

A. Charlotte County has a backlog of unmet facility needs. As the population continues to grow, this situation will become worse unless action is taken now. However, there are very real limits to residents' willingness and ability to pay taxes and government fees. Any effort to raise the level or improve the quality of Charlotte County's infrastructure must therefore be carefully targeted to agreed upon priorities, limited to a scale commensurate with the county's means, and financed in a manner sensitive to the resources of different categories of individuals. Some facilities may need to be tailored to and paid for by individual neighborhoods. Others might better be handled county wide. There are also questions about which facilities should be paid for by taxes or by user fees. An ongoing process, involving less government and more community, will be needed to develop this infrastructure package in detail.

B. One approach suggested by a few Assembly participants is to provide many services and facilities through Community Development Districts. Unlike Municipal Service Taxing Units and Municipal Service Benefit Units, these are small, special purpose local governments controlled by an elected board of directors. Their creation under Florida law would require approval by the County Commission and agreement by all property owners. The district's services and facilities would be tailored to individual neighborhoods or subdivisions, with the County controlling the decision on which services and facilities are to be financed and managed county wide. Once created, district residents, through the district board, would have control over local land use and responsibility for paying for, constructing, and managing community facilities. The districts would establish a clear link between payments and services, and they might help foster a sense of community at the neighborhood level, which is central to this Assembly's vision

for Charlotte County. The Assembly recognizes, however, that it will be difficult to establish Community Development Districts in platted areas because lot ownership is so widely dispersed and it is unlikely that 100 percent of the owners will agree to the terms of the district. A more practical approach would be MSTUs.

C. In terms of protecting the county's natural environment and enhancing its economic vitality, the most important facilities that need to be expanded or upgraded are drainage, storm water treatment, and the sewer system . Unfortunately, these are also the most expensive services that the County handles. Storm water and sewage treatment need to be improved because water runoff and leaching from septic tanks pose a threat to Charlotte Harbor, the very amenity that attracted many people to the area and that is the key to the county's future. These facilities must be expanded; the only question is how.

1. The high water and sewer rates argue strongly for an expansion of the existing system, so that more users can be brought in and economies of scale can be achieved. Although everyone in areas of significant population density should eventually be put on the system, the easiest form of expansion may be for new development. There are 10,000 vacant lots in mid-county with sewer availability. A growth management strategy aimed at providing incentives for building permits on sewers and disincentives for septic tanks should be considered. However, this initiative with respect to new development should not be at the exclusion of moving forward on septic tanks.

2. The backlash that accompanied the most recent sewer expansion program to require sewer connections for existing homes with septic tanks should not be misinterpreted.

Much of the information disseminated was mistimed and inaccurate. The project was perceived as too large and perhaps unnecessary, and was scaled back inappropriately.

3. A new sewer expansion initiative should be undertaken, but it should be very different from the previous one. The new initiative should be implemented in stages. Hookup should be mandatory, but the financing structure should make accommodations for those with low incomes. Opposition to this initiative is likely, but it may be overcome with leadership, education, and hard work.

a. One strategy that might be effective for developing a central sewer program is to replicate the approach followed for the jail and courthouse, in which a one-cent sales tax, approved by the voters, was earmarked for construction.

b. Another approach suggested by some Assembly participants is to privatize the sewer system and treatment facilities.

c. The method of assessment on equivalent residential unit (ERUs) methodology should be revisited.

4. Storm water runoff can be addressed by maintaining and enhancing the drainage system.

5. There are different views about how best to finance both the sewer expansion program and the improved drainage. One view is that a county wide tax--ad valorem, sales or gas--should be employed because this is a county wide problem. Another perspective is that charges should be linked directly to the individual homes or neighborhoods requiring the new or expanded facilities. This might be accomplished by creating sub-county drainage districts. These views

need not be contradictory. A county wide funding source could supplement direct charges on individual property owners.

6. Roads are generally adequate today but will need to be expanded to meet population growth in the future. Planning and financial preparations for this should begin immediately. Most participants in this Assembly think that the County should increase the gas tax. Currently, Charlotte County imposes only six cents of its local gas tax. If the County so chose, it could expand the gasoline tax by another five cents. Impact fees are considered to be at best insufficient to cover the cost of new or expanded roads. They may cover some of the cost of new construction, but the County must pay for maintenance forever. There is widespread support for reducing or eliminating impact fees to attract new business and housing development, especially if the gas tax is raised.

7. The Assembly participants are divided over the issue of boat ramps. A minority of participants feel that the number of ramps is sufficient in light of the county's limited resources. They argue that the ramps are being used by boaters from outside the county. A large majority believes that the existing number of boat ramps, and also the parking available around ramps, is woefully inadequate. This latter group says that limited access to the waterways is a tragedy given that the area's waterways are its best recreational amenities. The boat ramps at Laishley Park should be retained. Of course, new boat ramps and parking facilities are expensive. One proposed funding mechanism is a boat registration surtax. Research should also be conducted on whether the gasoline tax is being used adequately to cover the cost of constructing new boat ramps and parking. Another alternative would be to charge for parking and allow county residents to purchase annual decals.

8. There is also support for adding sidewalks/bike paths and large active parks with ballfields.

IV. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

A. Charlotte County has become dependent on population growth to fuel its economy. Now that growth has subsided to a mere one percent annually, the local economy has suffered. Several factors, not listed in any particular order, have contributed to slower growth:

1. The recession of early 1990s led to a bust in the housing market and the disappearance of the county's largest developers.

2. In the past, large developers had a extensive marketing programs to sell their lots. These no longer exist.

3. Uncertainty about the public's commitment to finance the sewer expansion program may have discouraged new construction.

4. The community may have projected a negative image.

5. Many residents still have a negative attitude toward any new development.

6. The boom during the 1980s was unsustainable.

7. County government regulations, red tape, and roadblocks may have discouraged construction and business.

8. High impact fees.

9. Litigation with local governments.

10. Excessively high water and sewer utility rates.

B. Slow growth and the deteriorating economic conditions accompanying it are causing anxiety about the future, especially among some residents who live on low incomes. Residents are losing money on their homes. Resale values are about ten percent lower than at this time last year, and a three year inventory exists of homes for sale. Because a disproportionate share of Charlotte County's population is entering the elderly stage of life, many residents are particularly concerned about being able to get their money out of their homes. Declining property values, increasing property taxes and rising utility charges only make the situation worse. Addressing this situation is one of Charlotte County's most important challenges.

C. Economic diversification is the key to restoring vitality and prosperity for the general public and security for Charlotte County's citizens. The boom town growth of the 1980's is not sustainable and, furthermore, not necessarily desirable. The housing industry is highly sensitive to any economic downturn, and an economy based on large scale developers catering to retirees is a formula for disaster. Charlotte County must avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. It must develop a diversified economic base that:

- 1.** Has more businesses with good paying jobs;
- 2.** Builds on its growing higher education institutions;
- 3.** Showcase its positive attributes, such as sun, water, and beaches.

D. Economic development initiatives should be directed at a number of business categories. These include clean industries, such as high tech and light manufacturing. Also desirable are corporate headquarters, distribution centers, and insurance processors, all of which offer higher wages. Charlotte County has many residents who are currently underemployed. These

types of businesses are attractive because they would meet the needs of these people, would not harm the environment, and would add to the tax base.

E. Efforts should also be undertaken to encourage business development, especially small businesses. This would encourage more youth to stay in the county to seek jobs or start their own companies. Minority-owned and female-owned small businesses should be encouraged as well.

F. Preference should be given for local businesses in the bidding process for public projects. Local government and private business should be encouraged to use local companies.

G. Only a few types of businesses should be discouraged. We want to improve the business climate in Charlotte County. Some types of businesses should be discouraged. They are:

1. Smokestack industry. This is unsightly and it pollutes.

2. Jails. The county does not need another regional correctional facility. The county does not produce the inmates and should not house correctional facilities.

3. Gambling. Although some Assembly participants support gambling, most believe it is undesirable.

4. Amusement parks. Large amusement parks are opposed because of their impacts on traffic, signage, and surrounding development.

H. Charlotte County should create a friendlier environment for attracting new business and expanding existing businesses. Cracker Barrel and other businesses indicated that it found it more difficult to locate here than in any other community in Florida. One, several, or all of the following approaches should be considered in trying to promote economic expansion:

1. Streamline the permitting and inspection processes. The permitting and inspection processes are slow and detailed. Greater uniformity in standards might reduce this

problem. Additional staff may also be necessary, or better coordination of staff. However, some staff, perhaps reflecting the perceived philosophy of some County Commissioners, seem to be anti-growth.

2. Reducing or eliminating impact fees. Some believe that impact fees should be reduced by one-third to one-half across the board. Impact fees have a major effect on businesses. For example, Dairy Queen has a 5 percent profit margin. To pay a \$5,000 impact fee, Dairy Queen must sell an additional \$100,000 of its products. Furthermore, impact fees are viewed as a disincentive to economic growth. However, since impact fees are tied to the actual costs of public facilities necessitated by particular types of development, the community would have to pick up the cost. One recommendation was that impact fee waivers should be based on strict cost-benefit analysis with an eye toward our competitive positions with neighboring counties.

I. In promoting economic development, it is essential to consider architectural design issues. Strip commercial developments should be discouraged, and natural buffers and setbacks with strict design codes are needed to prevent tacky commercial development along major highways. In contrast, limited, high quality commercial development in or around neighborhoods should be encouraged, so as to create a village-like environment. The County should consider rezoning from low-density residential to OMI or commercial behind the strip development on Rt. 41 & 776 to allow for additional expansion, parking, and add a buffer zone.

J. Another important consideration in targeting economic development is location.

1. Shops and stores with residential units on the second floor should be encouraged in the downtowns. A desirable location for commercial development is off I-75, at

exit 29. Also, limited commercial development should be sited in large residential communities so that homeowners do not have to travel seven to ten miles to purchase a loaf of bread.

2. Neighborhood commercial development should be restricted from areas that lack necessary infrastructure; areas further than one-fourth of a mile from a collector road; and environmentally sensitive areas.

3. Many participants believe that Laishley Park should be retained in its present condition as a family-friendly waterfront park, where people from across the region gather together.

V. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND GROWTH MANAGEMENT

A. There is widespread support for appropriate environmental protection and growth management in Charlotte County. In addition, public education programs are needed. Local waterways, vegetation, and wildlife are critical resources, and they must be protected. Likewise, services need to be kept abreast of population growth, and the county's previously platted subdivisions need to be remediated. The only questions are whether serious problems exist already and what kinds of controls and programs are practical. Overall, the aim should be to create a pragmatic system that moves the county toward the Assembly vision while balancing concerns for environmental protection, property rights, regulatory flexibility, and costs.

B. Surface water pollution. The quality of life in Charlotte County is proportionate to the quality of our water. However, uncertainty and disagreement exist over the extent to which various potential sources of pollution are in fact causing problems. Some participants believe that enough studies have already been conducted, and that the County should proceed aggressively on

the basis of existing evidence. Some believe that Charlotte County should have greater representation on the 'peer review team' for the Southwest Florida Water Management District and the hydro-biological program should be revised, to start immediately, by arms-length, third-party scientists. Others say that residents need more local participation in and information about scientific research conducted by the South Florida Water Management District, the University of Florida, and others on the health of the county's waterways, sources of pollution, and possible options for solving problems.

1. A majority of Assembly participants believe that septic tanks at urban area densities are a main source of surface water pollution and that their elimination should be a top priority.

2. Also of concern are agricultural and lawn pesticides and fertilizers. They are washed off into drainage canals and, ultimately, into the county's rivers and its harbor. The extensive use of septic systems can add to this problem, especially during the rainy season, during floods, and in areas where septic tanks are located close to canals. Excessive hydrocarbons, nitrogen, and phosphates in the canals and rivers cause unnatural algae blooms which kill fish and crustaceans. The University of Florida is working with agribusiness around the state to develop an environmentally harmless fertilizer which would require less chemical input to produce greater agricultural output and would cause little, if any, pollution. This would be achieved by having all chemicals go directly to plant roots.

3. Another concern is the possibility of pollution to Shell Creek dam and reservoir. Among other risks, there is a risk of salt water being washed over the dam during a

hurricane. There is a need for an interconnect between the City of Punta Gorda water supply and the County water supply.

4. Charlotte Harbor was added to the national estuary program a year ago. This program includes monitoring by the Environmental Protection Agency, Mote Marine Lab, Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council, Southwest Florida Water Management District, and the County. However, the County should remain vigilant.

C. Groundwater pollution. A few Assembly participants believe that the GATX pipeline is a potential source of large scale groundwater pollution. It would cross Charlotte County's watershed for the Peace River. However, most Assembly participants believe that sufficient safeguards are in place to prevent pollution.

D. At least two potential problems exist with respect to withdrawal of fresh water.

1. One is withdrawal of water from Charlotte Harbor. Some participants of the Assembly recommend that the Board of County Commissioners should urge the State Legislature to examine this issue. A regional, five county, water supply agency serves the region. Some believe that we should not allow Peace River water to go to Sarasota County. Deed restrictions that require watering of lawns should be revisited.

2. Another potential problem is with residential wells, particularly those that are located close to the coastline. If the fresh water supply is over drafted, salt water seeps through the lime rock and turns the well water brackish. It is no longer suitable for consumption.

3. There are competing uses for available fresh water, including residential, business, and agricultural needs. Technology may offer some solutions, such as reverse osmosis.

However, even reverse osmosis, which turns brackish water into fresh water, has a polluting byproduct, a brine residue, that must be disposed of.

E. Development of previously platted subdivisions. It is widely recognized that the county's previously platted subdivisions pose a potential problem for Charlotte County. The question is what, if anything, can and should be done about them.

1. Some Assembly participants believe that the County government should not try to take on this problem. These participants prefer to let the market work. As demand grows, developers may eventually buy up the lots and replat them to conform with modern planning standards.

2. However, a majority of Assembly participants want the County to take an active role. They see the platted lands problem as a long-range problem. It is a difficult issue now, but it will only grow worse in the future. The County should try to develop a partnership with developers to create proper subdivisions with adequate infrastructure and services. The aim should be on development with a strong neighborhood feeling.

F. If the County tries to address the platted lands problem, it should do so in several steps.

1. First, research is needed on the extent of the problem and possible solutions. Each alternative solution should have an economic analysis to determine future marketability, service needs and costs, and impact on the tax base.

2. Possible options, in no particular order, include: begin a land bank funded by an impact fee or the Florida Community Trust program encouraging lot consolidation. (Those who combine several lots on which to build a single unit would have a lower fee than those who build

on individual lots.); establish disincentives for building on a single lot outside the urban services area; form community redevelopment districts to fund facilities; offer incentives to private developers to purchase lots, consolidate them, and replat; create urban opportunity areas where owners of underdeveloped lots are given incentives to exchange their lots for those located closer to urban nodes or existing development; ask the Department of Community Affairs to participate in developing a pilot project on platted vacant lands; consider dividing the current urban services area to create urban villages; acquire lots at tax auction and from willing sellers; use a lot bank for a lot swap program to discourage building in certain areas; encourage new development to use transfer of development rights (TDRs); and charge lots in non-urban service areas the full costs of providing services and facilities (not the average cost).

3. Next, the County should engage in a highly active public information campaign to educate the public about the facts, issues, implications, and costs associated with possible solutions; eminent domain; and community redevelopment.

G. The Assembly participants are divided over whether the County should purchase environmentally significant lands.

1. Those who oppose such a program say that the state and County already do this on a very large scale, that land maintenance is expensive, and that in any event Charlotte County lacks the necessary resources.

2. Those who do favor land acquisition counter that land acquisition is the fairest and most effective method for controlling land use.

VI. SERVICES

A. It would be nice if the County could meet everyone's needs for services, but this is impossible. The willingness to pay taxes and fees is severely limited because of public cynicism about government and the large number of residents with low-incomes. Some services are mandated by state and federal law, which eats into the local resource pool. With such limited resources, the County must set priorities. It must differentiate between what is required and what is desired. It must also include money not only to build facilities but also to operate them.

B. The top service priorities in Charlotte County are public safety and education. Public Safety includes police protection, fire protection, emergency medical services, and disaster/emergency management. Education includes the K-12 system, the community college, and Florida Gulf Coast University.

C. Some believe the current level of funding for public safety and education is adequate and others do not. Although some problems were noted, Assembly participants rated the education system as very good.

D. There are several areas where an increase in public funding should be considered, with consideration to weighing competing needs.

1. One is for economic development. This is the key to achieving the Assembly's vision for Charlotte County. As it stands, the County invests very little in economic development, much less than neighboring counties.

2. Health and human services may also need additional support, including but not limited to mental health programs, affordable housing, and crisis intervention.

3. There is some support for increasing the funding for parks and recreation.

However, given the County's limited resources, some should be paid for by user fees. Recreation should include programs for all youth, fields for active sports, and activities for the community.

4. There is also support for increased code enforcement to improve neighborhood appearance.

5. Increased funding for growth management may be necessary in light of the objectives of this Assembly.

E. Perhaps the best way Charlotte County can deal with its financial limits is to be innovative. Suggested innovations include:

1. Use of schools for activities at night by community groups;
2. Year-round schools;
3. Privatizing various services;
4. Seeking looser state control over public schools;
5. As with the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), the County

functioning as an informal coordinator, bringing in volunteers and reducing duplication of services.

6. Sharing public facilities as community resources.

F. Mass transit may be needed because of the large number of transportation disadvantaged; however, the County cannot afford a traditional mass transit system because the county's low density makes it impractical. The current public transit system provides medical, nutrition, and shopping to only 'eligible' transportationally disadvantaged individuals. Lower cost

options include expanding our small, demand-activated systems, and expanding the system to include only mainline service between a few high demand areas.

VII. PUBLIC FINANCE, VOLUNTEERISM, AND PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

A. Charlotte County's situation with respect to infrastructure is similar to its predicament regarding services. Its needs exceed its financial resources and political will. Consequently, the County must focus on essential services, nurture public confidence, and look for every way possible to make its dollars go further.

B. The Board of County Commissioners should conduct a study to evaluate the County's budget and services over a period of years to determine how the County can best provide facilities to the public. The analysis should include revenue sources and levels of taxation, fees, fines, the amount spent on consultants, and the allocation of community redevelopment agency (CRA) tax increment funding. The analysis would assist Commissioners in determining what, if any, adjustments need to be made to County operations, finance, and service levels. For example, various businesses might be evaluated in terms of how much they provide in taxes versus how much they receive in public services. The study should also recommend mechanisms to monitor revenues, expenses, and service levels. Another approach is to engage the citizenry in a dialogue on how much they are willing to pay for various levels of service.

C. The top infrastructure priorities for Charlotte County are the sewer expansion program, drainage, and expansion and maintenance of county roads. Lower in priority are recreational facilities, libraries, and cultural buildings.

D. Opportunities may exist to reduce the size and cost of government by privatizing certain services. The study mentioned above could include a privatization component to address this possibility. Although privatization is not a panacea, it should be seriously considered. Areas where privatization should be evaluated include (but are not limited to) water utilities, select public works projects, management of the county jail, vehicle maintenance, boat ramps and docks, mosquito control, EMS, and landfill operations. Whether privatization is warranted may depend on the response of the private sector, which cannot be known in advance. The County would let bids, monitor services, and conduct cost-benefit studies to determine who can provide services at the highest level of public benefit for the least cost. In some cases, the County may be the lowest bidder.

E. Another option might include more public-private partnerships linking social service providers, non-profit groups, and volunteers. The County should maximize the use of volunteers.

F. Most Assembly participants favor an expanded utilization of user fees for those public services not covered under the basic health, welfare, and public safety umbrella. User fees can lead to situations where public facilities, such as the auditorium rental, are too costly for some civic groups to use. On the other hand, fees require groups to live within their means as we all do in our personal financial management. A market oriented approach also leads public facilities to be planned and financed on the basis of future revenues. One way to accommodate the needs of special groups is to cross-subsidize different services, charging a profitable fee for high demand facilities and subsidizing other facilities or groups with lower fees. Boat ramps and dock rental might be a source of revenue.

G. The three percent cap was politically expedient, but it was arbitrary and is now outmoded. Elected officials should not rely on arbitrary limits. They should levy the minimum level of taxes and charge the minimum amount of fees deemed necessary to pay for the services residents need and demand.

H. The Assembly strongly endorses the use of MSBUs to offer a higher level of services to areas willing to pay for them. This is a fair way of addressing neighborhood needs and generating revenues from vacant lots.

VIII. STRENGTHENING THE COUNTY'S CIVIC CULTURE

A. The participants are divided on the question of whether the county's residents have a strong sense of civic culture. Some thought that the civic culture is too weak, some thought the civic culture is about right, and some thought the civic culture is pretty strong. There was universal agreement, however, that the level of civic culture could be improved in the future. One group believes civic culture is weak on a county wide basis, but it is fairly strong at the local or neighborhood level. Rude, intolerant, and ugly behavior at public meetings is a detriment.

B. Some positive examples of civic culture include: Kidspace; the YMCA; the Chamber of Commerce, especially the leadership training program; cultural programs such as the Charlotte County Visual Arts Center, Cultural Center, Charlotte Players, and the Symphony; Business Alliance; CARE; Air Show; 4-H; Punta Gorda Block Party; Edison Community College; and Franz Ross Park.

C. Participants have a mixed opinion when it comes to the question of Charlotte County's self-image. While some think the image is positive, others think not. There is a lack of agreement

about what public image the county has now and what image it should try to project. However, everyone does agree that the image should be positive. In any event, if the county is undecided about what kind of public image it wants to project, public perceptions of it will be fuzzy and varied.

D. Participants agree that they should make an effort to “build bridges” of understanding and friendship among residents in the county.

1. Negative reporting by the press affects the way in which local residents view themselves and the perceptions of those living outside of the county. Residents should work with the media, print, radio, and TV to promote a more positive coverage of the county.

2. Many participants think that the county should make a greater effort to create bridges between youth and retirees in the community. Some techniques to accomplish this were mentioned earlier.

3. Another suggestion is to seek support for the creation, printing, and dissemination of a Charlotte County events calendar that is distributed to all residents. While beneficial to all, such a bulletin would be especially helpful to seasonal residents.

4. Many agree that seasonal residents make vital contributions in the way of taxes, support for civic and cultural activities, and volunteering many hours to the libraries, hospital, and social services. Their purchasing power is important to the local economy. These contributions should receive greater recognition.

5. Charlotte County should rent billboards to let visitors know that Charlotte exists and what it is all about.

E. The county's business climate needs improvement. Some Assembly participants think that the situation is deplorable and verging on crisis. Causes or features of this bad atmosphere are high impact fees, high utility rates, complicated regulations, uncertainty over the sewer expansion program, and an anti-growth philosophy among some elected officials and citizens.

F. The county has many organizations to study and transmit knowledge about the county's history. These include the Peace River Historical Society, the Historical Preservation Board, Leadership Charlotte, Pioneer Days, the Ponce De Leon Festival, and the Conquistadors. However, many participants believe that there is room for improvement.

G. Charlotte County does recognize the contributions of its leaders and honors them. Franz Ross Park and the Joseph Tringali Center were named after former County Commissioners. Examples of awards include the Pacesetters Awards, Volunteer Awards, Aviation Pioneer Award, Paul Harris Award, Teacher of the Year, Senior Award, Student of the Month, Hall of Fame Awards, the annual Rotary Club award, and others. Many believe that the county could do more to recognize its' leaders and encourage civic leadership.

IX. IMPLEMENTATION

A. This Assembly process should be continued and made a regular part of our community's decision-making. The Steering Committee should continue meeting to provide continuity and organization. It should also monitor the implementation of the recommendations contained in this policy statement, regularly issuing a "report card on the future."

B. The Assembly's recommendations should become the backbone of the County's revised Comprehensive Plan, and the Assembly itself should participate in the planning process from the beginning.

C. The Steering Committee and the Assembly participants should engage others in a discussion about this policy statement. The Steering Committee should meet with the County Commissioners to discuss the feasibility of implementing the recommendations. Public hearings to discuss the recommendations should be held by the County with Assembly participation.

D. The Steering Committee should establish goals, objectives, and strategies to evaluate implementation of the Assembly's vision.

E. The Charlotte Assembly Steering Committee should meet at least quarterly, and the Charlotte Assembly should meet at least annually.

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