

Charlotte County update for 7/15/20

County launches sales tax education initiative

By Hector Flores, Charlotte County Administrator

Charlotte County has launched an educational campaign for the extension of the 1% local option sales tax that goes before voters in the upcoming general election. I want to provide some background on the sales tax, which was first approved by voters in 1994 to fund the construction of the Justice Center and the county jail. Since that time voters passed extensions of the sales tax in 1998, 2002, 2008 and 2014. The money has funded more than 90 projects, including public safety facilities, roads, parks, libraries, sidewalks, boat ramps, the Charlotte Harbor Event and Conference Center, water projects and more.

Last year the County Commission directed staff to convene a citizen focus group to review proposed projects to be funded by an extension of the sales tax. The group met 11 times over several months to produce a recommended project list. Earlier this year, the commission approved 16 projects and an additional seven projects to be funded if revenues exceed projections. The City of Punta Gorda likewise convened a focus group of citizens to make recommendations and the council approved a list of 12 Tier 1 projects and seven Tier 2 projects. By state statute, the city receives about 10% of the revenue based on its population.

To view the list of county projects, visit www.CharlotteCountyFL.gov and click 1% Local Option Sales Tax. The sales tax website also has information about all past projects, maps of past and proposed project locations and details about each project, as well as presentations provided to the focus group and commission and minutes of each focus group meeting.

The 1% local option sales tax is applied to transactions subject to state sales tax — not food, medicine or certain services — and only to the first \$5,000 of large purchases, such as vehicles. The sales tax is paid by everyone, not just residents. Tourists, visitors and businesses contribute about 30% of the total revenue generated.

As part of the outreach program, you'll soon see signs showing past projects that were funded by the sales tax, flyers with additional information and videos on the county television channel, CC-TV and our social media portals. As with any election, an educated voter is best equipped to make decisions affecting their future and the future of their community.

The sales tax referendum will be on the Nov. 3 ballot. I know a sizable number of county voters vote by mail or do early voting, which begins Oct. 19. I encourage everyone to learn as much as they can about the sales tax, including past projects it has funded and the projects that will be funded if it passes.

COVID-19 safety

According to the Department of Health, Charlotte County is experiencing what is called community spread of the coronavirus that causes COVID-19. It is more important than ever for residents and visitors to follow Centers for Disease Control guidelines on frequent hand washing, social distancing and wearing a mask in public when social distancing isn't possible.

Avoid crowded indoor spaces and if you find yourself in a crowd not behaving responsibly, leave.

One of the trends in the recent spike of positive virus tests is a rising number of younger people contracting the virus. The danger, aside from whatever health impacts the virus may or may not have on them, is passing the virus onto other, perhaps more vulnerable, people in their households, workplaces, restaurants or other public spaces.

Charlotte County has always rallied together whenever we've faced challenges. None of us has ever experienced something like this pandemic, so there's naturally going to be uncertainty, fear and anxiety. What it doesn't need to be is divisive. In the county organization, we stress a culture of kindness and mutual respect. As public servants, I think it's important to help set that tone. I join with our County Commission, which has repeatedly urged residents and visitors to follow CDC guidelines on face coverings, social distancing and hand washing. We're not out of the woods yet. Together we can get through it.

Hector Flores is the Charlotte County administrator. Readers may reach him at Hector.Flores@CharlotteCountyFL.gov.