

Charlotte County update for 3/31/21

Before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

By Hector Flores

In my weekly message to county employees, I always close with the line, “Have a purposeful week.” Volumes have been written about how to live a purpose-driven life. Studies have shown organizations are more successful and people healthier in a purposeful culture.

So what does purpose-driven mean?

For me, it’s about identifying what you want to do, who you are serving and what impact it will have. It means putting together a plan and the means to accomplish it. It can be applied to a task, a career, your family or even your state of mind. I find purpose in service. Now in my 25th year working for Charlotte County, I just passed my one-year anniversary of serving as county administrator.

I took this opportunity to consider where we were before COVID-19, how we handled it and what comes next. First, I looked at my own situation. Just before the pandemic, I took a family trip to the mountains, one of my favorite things to do. Little did I know how long it would be before I could do it again.

Then I looked at the pandemic’s impact on me and my family, including two mild infections, quarantine and teleworking for a time.

Lastly, I did what many of us have been doing, thinking what I was anticipating most. I thought about travel, restaurant meals, a ballgame. But what stood out was the prospect of a crowded holiday gathering of family and friends at Thanksgiving or Christmas.

Then I looked at the county within that past, present and future framework. Before the pandemic, we experienced a tectonic shift in senior leadership. The long-time administrator and his deputy retired, and when I assumed my boss’s old position, I promoted a new deputy and an assistant administrator. Fortunately, we had all been part of the leadership team for more than a decade, so the transition went smoothly.

We worked on reinforcing the county’s culture with new, streamlined mission, vision and values statements. We wanted staff to link their work directly with the fulfillment of the county’s strategic plan and goals. Finding purpose in our work serving our community.

When the pandemic hit, the safety of the public and our employees was our top priority. What would we do to keep people safe and able to access the resources they needed, whether it was getting tested, having protective equipment or receiving information to avoid infection? How would we continue to provide services to keep the local economy from cratering and compounding the pandemic with a financial crisis? How could we marshal the resources of the community — businesses, non-profits, individuals — to fight back?

We invested in masks, cleaning supplies and disinfectants. We forged partnerships to distribute financial aid to struggling residents impacted by job losses, shorter work hours, illness or

quarantine restrictions. We invested in technology to allow staff to work from home, if possible, to keep services accessible to individuals and businesses. We moved people to where they could have the most impact, whether it was taking calls for assistance, coordinating supply storage and distribution logistics, crafting pandemic information messages, or supporting state Department of Health missions for testing, and later, vaccination.

With vaccinations now surpassing 110,000 people, we're closer to reaching the new normal we've been awaiting. But even before the vaccination mission kicked into high gear, we worked on future scenarios, their potential impacts on the county and how we would meet any challenges. Would a booming economy create jobs and prosperity, but burden infrastructure and pinch some residents out of the housing market? Would a prolonged recession bring budget and staff cuts and service disruptions? Variations considered what would happen if the county was viewed as a safe haven, drawing in even more residents or if our image as a retirement community would stymie our efforts to diversify the economy.

We don't pretend to have all the answers yet and no crystal ball to tell us which scenario will emerge. But I can tell you, we stand ready to seize the opportunities ahead of us while working purposefully to serve the people of Charlotte County every day.

Centennial Gala

Charlotte County will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the county's creation with a Centennial Gala, 6-11 p.m., April 23 at the Charlotte Harbor Event and Conference Center. This gala will include a cocktail hour, dinner, cash bar, dancing and live entertainment.

Tickets are \$65 per person and can be purchased by April 9 at charlottecounty100.com/centennial-gala. The Charlotte Harbor Event and Conference Center is located at 75 Taylor St. in Punta Gorda.

For information, contact Cindy DiGiacomo at 941-235-5009 or Cynthia.Digiacom@CharlotteCountyFL.gov.

Vaccine update

As of Wednesday, more than 112,000 people have been vaccinated in Charlotte County, according to the state vaccination database.

Gov. DeSantis' Executive opened eligibility for vaccines to anyone age 18 and older as of April 5 and the Pfizer vaccine has been approved for those over 16 years of age.

To preregister, visit MyVaccine.FL.gov or call 866-200-9160 (or 833-990-3549 for TTY users).

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