

Charlotte County update for 4/7/21

## **County Government Month Highlights Its Critical Role**

By Hector Flores

April is National County Government Month to showcase how the nation's more than 3,000 counties work to build and sustain healthy, safe and vibrant communities. It also is a chance to raise public awareness and understanding about the roles and responsibilities of counties.

In Florida, counties are political subdivisions of the state. Charlotte County was created on April 23, 1921 when the Legislature passed a bill later signed into law by Gov. Cary Hardee that divided DeSoto County into Charlotte, DeSoto, Glades, Hendry and Highlands counties. Now in its 100<sup>th</sup> year, Charlotte County is the most populated and prosperous of the five counties.

A large portion of our population are residents who moved here from other places where counties serve different functions. For example, in some states, counties' roles largely consist of judicial, law enforcement and corrections. In many states, towns and cities create and enforce ordinances and policies governing local businesses, development, and even schools.

Speaking of schools, in Florida they are funded and run by a separate, independent entity known as districts, which are regulated by the state. School districts have elected board members like county commissions and set tax levels (within limits determined by the state), curriculum and disciplinary policies.

There are 67 counties in Florida, ranging from large urban ones like Miami-Dade, Broward and Hillsborough to rural ones like DeSoto and Glades. Larger, more populated counties tend to have many cities that, like their northern counterparts, handle the administration of services and amenities like parks and recreation and law enforcement. Smaller counties may have only one city (in fact, all counties must have one city that serves as the county seat).

Punta Gorda is the county seat of Charlotte County. Its residents banded together to push for the creation of Charlotte County for many years before succeeding in 1921. Today, the city accounts for about 10% of the county's population.

What that means for the rest of the county's residents and business is that roads, parks, human services, community and economic development, government facilities, drainage, utilities, and emergency services are provided by the county (although in some cases, other governmental entities, such as a private or independent utility, like the Englewood Water District, provide water and wastewater services).

This large service area and past development patterns in the county pose challenges for county government, especially in the construction, operation and maintenance of roads, utilities and parks. For example, a densely populated city could have hundreds of utility customers for every mile of water or sewer line, yet many areas of Charlotte County have relatively few customers for each mile of pipeline and some areas have no central wastewater service at all. This pushes up the cost for customers and the significant use of septic tanks causes water pollution. The

county has an ambitious plan to address the water quality issue and voters approved a local option sales tax extension that includes \$10 million for funding water quality initiatives.

That same sales tax, which has been in effect since 1994 and renewed by voters five times, has also allowed the county to build roads, libraries, parks, sidewalks, fire stations and other public infrastructure that simply would not be fundable by property taxes.

Other infrastructure, such as local road and stormwater drainage maintenance, are funded by residents of numerous districts called municipal service benefit units or taxing units. Money paid into those districts stays in the districts. Many have resident advisory boards that provide counsel to staff and the County Commission on how to allocate those dollars. The districts allow neighborhoods to determine the level of service they want and pay for.

All counties face their own challenges, including their relationships with the state and federal government. Charlotte County belongs to national and state associations whose combined influence helps their members navigate issues that arise in those relationships, especially funding and regulation.

National County Government Month may not be as warm and cuddly as some other calendar notables such as the recent National Hug Day and National Puppy Day, but as you go about your business this month and wonder how that sidewalk got built, how quickly an ambulance arrived or how nice your child's ballfield is maintained, remember, that's your county government at work. Counties matter.

### **Centennial Gala**

Charlotte County will commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> 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 16 at [charlottecounty100.com/centennial-gala](http://charlottecounty100.com/centennial-gala). The Charlotte Harbor Event and Conference Center is located at 75 Taylor St. in Punta Gorda.

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