

## Charlotte County 2021 Year in Review

By Hector Flores

As I write this, we are closing out the year 2021, which presented its share of challenges, especially with the ongoing pandemic, but I wanted to highlight some of the county's many accomplishments and milestones this year.

Our Public Works Department received its hard-earned accreditation from the American Public Works Association. The team-building and staff development process improves internal communication and documentation of duties and responsibilities and delivers improved operational performance when workflows or processes are brought up to industry standards.

County departments earned 13 National Association of Counties Achievement Awards, bringing the number of awards we've received since 1987 to 38. In his citation recognizing the county's achievements, NACo President Gary Moore said, "County officials and front-line employees have demonstrated bold, inspirational leadership. This year's Achievement Award-winning programs illustrate the innovative ways counties build healthy, safe and vibrant communities across America."

Charlotte County was recognized by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection for exceeding the state's 75% goal for recycling. The county's 78% recycling rate for 2020 tied for first in the state with Pinellas County. It is the fourth year in a row, the county has exceeded the state's recycling goal.

Visitors have identified the county as a relative safe haven amid the COVID-19 outbreak. With our high vaccination rate and myriad outdoor activities year-round, our tourism numbers soared in Fiscal Year 2021 (Oct. 1, 2020-Sept. 30, 2021). Tourism development tax revenue climbed 36.8% to \$6,071,981 and visitor numbers rose 23.4% to about 863,000. The economic impact those visitors had totaled \$844 million.

We accomplished several milestones with capital projects in 2021. The Human Services Department's Family Service Center opened in November. The Gibraltar Drive center houses county partner agencies, including The Boys & Girls Club of Charlotte County, Charlotte Behavioral Health Care, Charlotte County Sheriff's Office, Department of Health, Drug Free Charlotte County, Jewish Family and Children's Service and the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services. The Human's Services Department's 211 call center is also operated there.

We also completed the final phase of the Burnt Store Road widening. Burnt Store is now four-laned from the Lee County line to U.S. 41. The three-phase project is both a vital hurricane evacuation route for tens of thousands of Charlotte and Lee county residents, it is also an economic catalyst for the South County area. The widening also vastly improves the safety of this highly travelled corridor.

The Punta Gorda-Charlotte County Metropolitan Statistical Area was ranked 11th in the 2021 Milken Institute Best-Performing Cities Index, improving from 39th to 11th from 2020 to 2021. The index is based on jobs, wages, and high-tech growth, housing affordability and household broadband access. The institute cited the county's "careful planning and investments [that] have led to improved local amenities."

The Purchasing Division earned the National Purchasing Institute's Achievement of Excellence in Procurement Awards for the 17<sup>th</sup> time.

Of course, a review of 2021 wouldn't be complete without noting our Centennial. Charlotte County has been commemorating the 100th anniversary of its creation on April 23, 1921 when Charlotte, Highlands, Glades and Hardee counties were divided from DeSoto County. The county held a Centennial Gala on April 23, 2021, created a Centennial website ([www.CharlotteCounty100.com](http://www.CharlotteCounty100.com)) and Facebook page ([www.Facebook.com/CharlotteCounty100](http://www.Facebook.com/CharlotteCounty100)) and held more than a dozen commemorative events, attended by thousands of residents and visitors. Centennial street sign toppers were installed at historic and prominent intersections, banners were hung from the Gilchrist and Collier bridges and seals were installed on driveways, facility entryways and manhole covers.

Here's to a great next 100 years.

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