

Charlotte County update for 2/12/20

Charlotte County by any other name is home

By Ray Sandrock, Charlotte County administrator

Like most Florida counties, Charlotte County's population is dominated by tens of thousands of residents who moved here from somewhere else. That diversity of backgrounds, cultures, accents and attitudes is part of what makes Charlotte County such an interesting place to live. Of course, now that we're in the season, tens of thousands more people who still live somewhere else are enjoying our beautiful winter weather.

There are many things that set Charlotte County apart from everywhere else, but the structure of our government agencies is one that generates many questions. Let me break it down for you.

Charlotte County, like all 67 Florida counties, was created by the Legislature as a political subdivision of the state. Northern states and Canadian provinces has counties, parishes or districts, too, but cities and towns run by local elected officials typically handle day-to-day government operations. Except for within the City of Punta Gorda, all of Charlotte County is governed by an elected Board of County Commissioners.

But that's not all there is to local government. Unlike northern communities, where the local government funds and/or oversees the school system, Florida school districts are run by an elected school board, which has its own taxing authority separate from the county. To confuse things a bit, you get your school and county taxes in the same bill mailed by the tax collector.

Which brings us to other government functions, such as tax collections, property valuations, law enforcement, clerk of court and elections, which are run by independently elected "constitutional officers." Unlike the school district, these agencies are funded by the county, but run by the elected officials.

Charlotte County is one of the few counties in the state with only one municipality. Punta Gorda has its own elected city council, its own police and fire departments and its own clerk. Let me clarify one thing about the City of Punta Gorda: it lies entirely south of the Peace River. Many residents of unincorporated Charlotte County have a Punta Gorda mailing address, such as in the Deep Creek and Harbour Heights communities. That's a U.S. Postal Service thing. If you have any doubt about whether you live in Punta Gorda, look at your tax bill. If there's a line that reads City of Punta Gorda, you live there.

Residents of some other named, but unincorporated, communities have Port Charlotte mailing addresses, even though they live outside what is commonly considered Port Charlotte. We don't have enough space to cover the actual platted community of Port Charlotte (roughly between Gardner Drive and the north end of the Murdock Carrousel Mall east and west of U.S. 41), the Census Bureau's Census County Division (everywhere north of the Peace and Myakka rivers to the Sarasota County line) and its Census-Designated Place (bounded by Loveland, Collingswood and Peachland boulevards and the Peace River).

Place names like El Jobean, Murdock, South Gulf Cove, Rotonda, Cleveland, Englewood East and more are not towns, but communities platted by developers. Some have elected

homeowners associations, others do not. Many have appointed advisory boards to make recommendations to the County Commission about how to spend their taxing district funds for road maintenance, sidewalks and drainage.

Folks who live and visit the Englewood area may know it enjoys a bi-county status. Part of the community of Englewood is in Sarasota County, some in Charlotte. Like Port Charlotte, the platted Englewood community has a defined area, but its name spreads wider than its borders to business and organization names. Englewood does have an elected water district board that serve water and sewer customers in Charlotte and Sarasota counties.

Many residents and visitors fly in or out of the Punta Gorda Airport, which is in Charlotte County and is run by the Charlotte County Airport Authority, another elected board created by the Legislature. County taxes do not fund the airport. It gets money from customers, tenants of the property it owns and grants from the Federal Aviation Administration. The airport used to be the Punta Gorda Army Air Field, which was built during World War II and used to train pilots. Read the historical marker outside the Bailey Terminal next time you pass through.

It can get confusing. I'm one of those Deep Creek residents with a Punta Gorda address. In the end, we're glad you found us, whatever community you call home (even if that's not really the name of the place you live).

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