

A primer on Parkside

By Ray Sandrock, County Administrator

On Sept. 19, the neighborhood group Team Port Charlotte held a fall kickoff workshop about the Parkside Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA). Assistant county administrator Kelly Shoemaker, community development director Dan Quick and I attended and gave an update on county projects in Parkside.

I have never seen a project like the Parkside CRA, how quickly it came to fruition—from the initiative in 2007, the Citizen's Master Plan in 2011, identifying funding sources and projects, and already many of the projects are moving forward. The local community, business groups, and Team Port Charlotte have all contributed energy and momentum that has moved this redevelopment along. Their commitment to Parkside is the reason it has progressed so quickly.

The Parkside initiative was envisioned in 2007, originally called the Medical District due to the many medical facilities within the boundaries. Parkside is located in mid-Port Charlotte—northeast of US 41, south of Midway Blvd. and Morningstar Waterway, and northwest of Fordham and Yale waterways. The CRA is approx. 1,100 acres, within boundaries selected in part by natural borders of roadways and canals.

Established in Sept. 2010 by the Board of County Commissioners, the CRA provided ways for the revitalization and reinvestment in the area to occur, including processes for the public to share in the development and implementation of the Citizen's Master Plan (the "Plan"). Well over 300 citizens participated and contributed to the Plan's development, responding in various public charettes, surveys, and stakeholder interviews to provide input and dialogue. In addition, TEAM Port Charlotte formed, a not-for-profit 501(c)3, and they have provided leadership and assistance consistently throughout the Plan process and continue to do so for Parkside.

The Plan was approved by the board in Aug. 2011 and is the district's CRA Plan, conforming with Florida Statute §163.360. The Plan serves three main purposes: prescribe the revitalization elements; provide guidance on when and how initiatives will be funded; and serve as support for grant applications to fund improvements. The Plan indicates the methods to use to finance the elements, which included the establishment of Tax Increment Financing (TIF).

All of the revitalization elements described in the Plan totaled over \$35M. How much will the TIF total over the 20-year lifespan of the plan? Based on an analysis of the current conditions, \$9M is the estimate. This number could grow if the area realizes great growth in businesses and high-end housing, but the estimate we can rely on is \$9M. In Feb. of this year the Board approved the advancement of \$9M in funding for Parkside projects via a loan from the Capital Projects Fund, to be repaid by Parkside TIF collections. Advancing funds for construction like this is unusual—typically funds are collected from TIF and then spent on projects—and demonstrates the importance of the CRA. The momentum of the Parkside CRA and major support by the citizens and Team Port Charlotte were key in making this happen.

Of the \$9M advancement, \$6.3M was authorized by the Board to be released for two projects: Harbor Blvd. and Elkcam Blvd. The Harbor Blvd. improvements, between US 41 and Olean Blvd., include reconstructing the roadway and adding trees and landscaping. Upgrades to water and sewer lines will also be completed at the same time. The engineering and design contract is being negotiated with a possible construction start 12 to 18 months from now. The Elkcam Blvd. project, between US 41 and Midway Blvd., includes a 10-foot multi-use path on the west side. Trees will be planted on both sides of the road. This project is in the design phase with a possible Feb. 2013 construction start, contingent on the completion of a reclaimed water line by Charlotte County Utilities. Next year the same portion of Elkcam Blvd. will be resurfaced and the intersection with Gertrude St. will become a four-way stop.

Several other elements in the Plan to revitalize Parkside are underway. County staff members from numerous departments are working with community partners and other funding sources, resulting in progress that everyone should be proud of.

This summer staff from our growth management division, Code Enforcement officers, and Parkside's Weed and Seed Steering Committee hosted two public meetings to engage citizens and identify concerns and ideas for public safety, aesthetics and other factors to achieve the vision in the Plan. Over 250 participants attended the workshops at the Cultural Center of Charlotte County, on Aaron St. within Parkside. In addition, one county Code Enforcement officer is now dedicated to Parkside, attending neighborhood watch meetings and other meetings.

Our engineering division is working on an algae removal and dredge project for Sunshine Lake and Sunrise Waterway. Engineering is also working on a recharge well project for Sunshine Lake and Sunrise Waterway, to be completed directly after the algae removal project. Both projects are funded by the Mid-County Stormwater MSBU. In addition, this MSBU approved our engineering division to apply for a grant with SWFWMD to do a nutrient source evaluation study on Sunshine Lake/Sunrise Waterway. The matching funds would be paid for by the MSBU.

A collaborative project between Charlotte County human services, Keep Charlotte Beautiful and Team Port Charlotte will result in a Parkside community garden at the Family Services Center on Gibraltar Drive. The project should be complete at the end of October with 11 beds. A \$3,000 seed grant from Waste Management was received and Team Port Charlotte and Keep Charlotte Beautiful are working on other grants to fund the project.

Economic development staff sent an application to the Project for Public spaces, which resulted in Charlotte County being one of ten communities in the U.S. to receive assistance from the Livability Solutions organization, funded by the EPA's Office of Sustainable Communities. The Walkable and Livable Communities Institute (WALC) completed the "Toward Walkable Places" report for both the Parkside and Charlotte Harbor CRAs. WALC held a series of community events in April 2012, including a town hall meeting and a walking audit. The final report includes recommendations to improve the walkability of the area, a goal of the Parkside Plan.

The next step is the development of the Parkside Revitalization Plan (PReP), which will consist of the goals, objectives, and policies for carrying out the vision of the Citizen's Master Plan. The PReP is in the early stages of development, and will eventually be presented to citizens for input via several focus groups. The Parkside CRA is a testament to the possibilities that can happen through partnership, commitment, and community support. Together we are achieving positive results that make a difference in Charlotte County.