

Charlotte County update for 9/14/16

County commemorates opening of fire training facility

By Ray Sandrock, Charlotte County Administrator

With pre-dawn media demonstrations and a mid-morning ribbon-cutting, Charlotte County commemorated the opening of its new fire training facility last Wednesday on the Public Safety Complex campus. Public Safety Director and Fire/EMS Chief Marianne Taylor shared the history of the project with county commissioners, county staff and me during her opening remarks. Chief Taylor has a special appreciation for the new facility, in part because she formerly served as the department's training chief. Chief Taylor attended Fire Academy at the now-demolished training tower and oversaw the last recruit assessment and training class.

The old training facility, built in 1983, was heavily damaged by Hurricane Charley. Since then, recruits and active personnel have had to travel to other counties for training. The new \$720,000 facility, which opened in June, was funded through sales tax revenues and impact fees on new construction. Comprised of interconnected shipping containers, the facility is outfitted with doors, staircases, windows, a faux rooftop section and a smoke room where trainers can burn pallets to create real-world circumstances in a controlled environment.

Among the training exercises now available locally are apparatus placement, hose and ladder management, fire suppression systems, forcible entry scenarios, search and rescue, victim and firefighter extraction and more. In addition, where Charlotte County personnel for years have had to travel to train, we can now host neighboring departments at our facility.

I think Deputy Chief Jason Fair summed it up at the ceremony: "We are excited for the opportunities this new structure and the grounds will bring to Charlotte County Fire/EMS. We have a strong and capable team of men and women. This facility will build on that to ensure we are ready for the next emergency."

Skate park

Two new skate park elements, a mini half-pipe and a pyramid, have been installed at the Don Cerbone Memorial Skate Park on Carmalita Drive east of Punta Gorda. I'd like to acknowledge the role Charlotte High School sophomore Mathew Brown played in adding these features to the park. Brown started a change.org campaign, which caught the attention of county commissioners and staff.

Community Services staff met with Brown and other skaters at Carmalita Park to discuss replacing equipment removed for safety reasons. Funding to replace the two pieces of equipment was identified and the equipment was installed last week. Future improvements at the skate park will include a shade structure, picnic tables and additional sidewalks to improve accessibility.

Let's Eat, Englewood

To generate publicity for the Englewood Chamber of Commerce's Let's Eat, Englewood Restaurant Week Sept. 15-29, the Charlotte Harbor Visitor & Convention Bureau arranged a tasting tour of Englewood with Emily Ellyn, the Retro Rad Chef from Food Network, and local members of the media. The group visited Villa Capri Italian Restaurant, Rum Bay on Palm Island and Farlow's on the Water. The next day, the bureau arranged for Ellyn to appear on Fox 4's Morning Blend. On Tuesday, representatives from the Englewood Chamber of Commerce appeared on another segment of the Morning Blend. Ellyn also dined at the Lock 'N Key Restaurant, where she toured the kitchen and shared her tasting tour experience.

Rays video

Tourism Bureau Sales and Marketing Manager Sean Doherty and I are taping interviews today with a video production company working on a show called Baseball From The Beginning: Tampa Bay. The theme of this episode will be community partners. The program airs on Fox Sports Sun.

Of course, Charlotte County and the Rays have had a great, long-term partnership stretching back to before their first spring training season here in 2009. Since then more than a half-million baseball fans have passed through the turnstiles at Charlotte Sports Park. The 20-year deal with the Rays included a \$29 million renovation of the stadium, which was named by fans as the best spring training venue in the country in 2014. The funding came from a Florida Sports Foundation grant and a local tax on hotel rooms and other short-term accommodations.

The return of that investment was immediate. The Rays topped their previous highest spring training attendance by 30 percent that first year and have averaged more than 70,000 fans each spring. In 2015, we commissioned an economic impact study that found the Rays and spring training pumped \$21 million into the county's economy in 2014.

Coincidentally, our Community Services Department has organized an outing for local Rays fans to catch Tuesday's game against the New York Yankees at Tropicana Field. For only \$60, we'll provide free parking at Charlotte Sports Park, round-trip transportation, a lower box seat and a hat. The bus leaves at 4 p.m. for St. Pete and departs for home a half-hour after the game ends. For information, call 941-235-5010.

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