

Commission discusses future of cultural center

Hector Flores

At its Tuesday meeting, the County Commission had a lengthy discussion about the future of the former Cultural Center of Charlotte County facility, including the Port Charlotte Public Library.

Due to damage from Hurricane Ian and subsequent damage from hurricanes Helene and Milton, the facility has been deemed a total loss, with the exception of the library. The county recouped \$2.2 million from its insurance provider, which will be used to cover the cost of demolition, which will take about six to eight months to complete. Since the library was already scheduled to be replaced, the board opted to save money by taking it down at the same time as the rest of the structures on the property.

The library will remain open until the Mid-County Regional Library reopens in a few months. The size and features of a library replacement will be discussed at future meetings.

Staff conducted public input sessions in 2024 and used the findings to develop a master site plan with several options for the board to consider for a new facility. One of the issues with any new design is the size of the facility would have to be much smaller than the existing one because stormwater retention requirements have changed dramatically since the original structure was built in 1971.

Among the features suggested by the board was “flex” space that could be used for multiple purposes, including meetings and theatrical and musical performances. The option favored by the board also includes a historical center. To accommodate visitors, staff is proposing a two-story garage beside the facility. Commissioners also discussed the potential for using part of the parcel for an affordable housing complex.

While the project was reviewed by the Sales Tax Funding Group for potential inclusion in an extension of the 1% local option sales tax, the board also discussed an option presented by staff to explore the potential of a public-private partnership. The proposal would have to be vetted by a consultant to explore the potential risks and rewards of partnering with a private entity to develop the parcel with the features the board wants but that also provides the partner with a profit motive.

The next step in the project pathway will be a future workshop to explore findings by Facilities Management about the market for a public-private partnership and a timetable for moving forward. Subsequently, the board would be asked to decide at a regular meeting whether to pursue a partnership or for the county to build the facility with possible sales tax funding. The timing of any decision would be affected by the Nov. 3 referendum, because if it is not approved, the county's options will be reduced.

*Readers may reach Charlotte County Administrator Hector Flores at
Hector.Flores@CharlotteCountyFL.gov.*