

Sales tax is an investment in county's future

By Hector Flores

The Charlotte County Commission approved a referendum to be placed on the Nov. 3 general election ballot. Voters will be asked to approve a 20-year extension of the existing 1% local option sales tax, which has been in place for 30 years. This is not a new tax. Voters have approved six terms that have funded more than 150 school, public safety, infrastructure and quality of life projects.

Past sales tax terms have been for two, four and six years. Some have asked, why ask for a 20-year term this time? A 20-year term for the 1% local option sales tax extension would enable the county to use bond financing to pay for projects rather than using the current "pay as we go" policy. Bond financing would enable the county to deliver more projects faster, lower construction cost inflation exposure, enable the county to seek matching grant funds and improve its long-term planning.

One of the benefits of funding projects with the 1% local option sales tax is it is a fair funding source paid by everyone, not just county residents. Tourists and seasonal visitors contribute their fair share toward roads and sidewalks that improve the quality of life for everyone. It is estimated visitors pay about 20% of the total money generated. Construction companies also pay a significant percentage.

A citizen sales tax focus group reviewed dozens of projects proposed for sales tax funding and delivered recommendations for the project list to the County Commission. When the board decided to seek a 20-year term, additional projects from the county's Capital Needs Assessment list were added to the ones recommended by the focus group. There are 44 tier one and 11 tier two county projects on the list. The city's list has 38 projects.

Every dollar generated by the sales tax stays in Charlotte County, funding school facility and safety projects, Sheriff's Office stations, fire stations, water quality projects, roads and county facilities. The City of Punta Gorda receives just over 9% of the funds generated, which have paid for more than 40 projects, including police, fire and emergency vehicles, downtown flooding mitigation, historic preservation, Laishley Park and the Harborwalk.

One of the county projects would fulfill a promise made by county commissioners when the privately operated Cultural Center of Charlotte County shut down. The promise was to rebuild a center that would serve as a collective gathering place for the community. Other projects on the list would complete road projects that will ease congestion and improve safety. New sheriff's offices and county fire stations are also on the list.

Our community has voted to invest in its future for 30 years. Charlotte County simply would not be what it is today without that investment.

For more information, including the complete project list, visit
www.CharlotteCountyFL.gov/salestax.

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