



**2026 Sales Tax Focus Group
Charlotte County Administration Center, Room B-106
18500 Murdock Circle, Port Charlotte, FL 33948
3:00 - 5:00 p.m.
September 25, 2025**

Members Present: Eric Axelson, Donna Barrett, Gary Bayne, Lucienne Pears, Bob White, Cindy Marsh-Tichy, Steve Vieira, Larry Yerger, Lynne Matthews, and Richard Russell.

Members Excused: Kathi Obendorfer, Gary Butler, Ray Laroche, and Mark Vianello. Unexcused: Sean McLaughlin.

Others Present: Tommy Scott, Director of Community Services, Pam Kirchner, Financial Manager, Kim Phillips, Financial Analyst, Francine Lisby, Assistant Budget Director, Travis Perdue, Director of Facilities Management.

Welcome: Emily Lewis, Deputy County Administrator opened the meeting at 3 p.m. Ms. Lewis welcomed all in attendance and reminded the Focus Group Members and Members of the Public to please sign their names on the Sign-In sheets.

Approval of September 15, 2025 Minutes:

MOTION WAS MADE BY LARRY YERGER, SECONDED BY DONNA BARRETT TO APPROVE AS PRESENTED THE SEPTEMBER 15, 2025 MINUTES. MOTION CARRIED 10:0.

Public Comment: Ms. Lewis opened the floor for Public Comment on Agenda items only. There were no public comments.

Presentations: Sales Tax Projects: QUALITY OF LIFE

Mr. Tommy Scott, Director of Community Development was present today to give an overview of the Quality of Life projects on today's Agenda.

Project: Myakka River Park: Continuation of Myakka River Master plan to bring the park up to the standard of the Parks & Recreation Master Plan.

Proposal: Phase 2 includes lighted parking, ropes course, boardwalks, a fishing pier, an ADA kayak launch, multi-purpose field, additional pedestrian access points, and roadway expansion.

Mr. Scott gave an overview of Phase 1 (which includes a parking lot and an ADA kayak launch) before discussing the proposal for Phase 2, which is to design and bring in all the elements necessary to complete the park. Member Yerger inquired if the photos were actual photos of the park? Mr. Scott replied the photos shown were representative to assist the Focus Group in visualizing what a potential park amenity will look like. Member Yerger asked for an explanation of the rope course. Mr. Scott explained it is a general rope course with elevated structures and an open space for trust exercises and leadership development while working the course. Member Barrett asked how the listed amenities for this project are chosen? Mr. Scott explained the development process for amenities (which included three public meetings) where the community was invited to share their ideas. The citizens were shown the property and asked for their input about what they wanted in their park and their choices were ranked. Their final comments were then incorporated into the Master Park Plan. Member Barrett asked what does ADA canoeing include? Mr. Scott explained that most parks have a natural path launch for kayaks where the kayaks are dragged into the water. An ADA system is roller-based and has an ADA path to the launch area. It allows the individual to roll the kayak down to the water and roll it back up while using an ADA pathway. This device allows easier access than a natural pathway and is more accessible for those with mobility challenges. Member White asked if there were opportunities for additional funding for this project? Mr. Scott conveyed that these community parks are only funded through Capital Projects or Sales Tax. The ropes course might potentially have other funding, but all Community Parks are funded this way. Member Yerger asked about operational costs. Mr. Scott indicated the operational plan included 2 full-time employees and vehicle costs. Member Yerger commented that The Project Sheet listed \$30,000 for operational costs. Mr. Scott said it should be \$375,000 due to operational costs, two employees and vehicle costs. Member Bayne asked about grant funding and if available would it be successful? Mr. Scott indicated it was an option through the Florida Recreation Development Assistance Program through the Department of Commerce. Ms. Lewis interjected that there were only 2 grant programs, and the maximum award is \$200,000. It is helpful but it will not fund an entire park. Mr. Scott followed up commenting that it is a competitive process across the state. While we have been successful in the past, it is not reliable. Member Yerger asked if the grant was construction based and Mr. Scott replied affirmatively. Member Pears asked about the different phases for the park development. Mr. Scott said Phase 1 (which included the parking and kayak launch) was completed around 2020. Member Pears commented that this project represents build out from the original project. Ms. Pears then asked if this would complete the park, or do you envision a Phase 3? No, replied, Mr. Scott. Member Yerger asked how long to build this type of park? Mr. Scott said probably two years after the project is funded. The funding and the project work is spread out over time depending upon the projected cash flow analyzed by the Fiscal Department. We pay as we go said Mr. Scott. Member Axelson said he didn't realize this park existed and is excited to check it out and continued with questions. He asked will the money be wasted on what has been spent so far if the project does not move forward? Mr. Scott affirmed that no, the parking and kayak launch will still be completed and the park useable for the public. The other plans, if not funded at this time, will still move forward at another time. Other avenues will be investigated for additional funding. Nothing is wasted, just the phasing is stretched out. Member Axelson asked, when the option is to finish a park or develop a new park, is there a priority of one over the other? Mr. Scott stated that all the 20 projects he was presenting are worthy projects for funding, but it is through this Focus Group and the Board of County Commissioners that the list will be narrowed down. If he had a choice, he would choose each one as the community needs them and the county staff have developed the plans.

Member Barrett reminded Mr. Axelson that at the end of the presentation the Focus Group will rank all the projects. Everyone will look at the list and have different priorities. Ms. Lewis interjected that currently the Focus Group is ranking the projects individually but at the end, the larger picture will emerge and from that, create the project ranking recommendation that the Focus Group decides together. Mr. Scott noted that the development or conclusion of a project is an evolution over many years as everything cannot be done at once. All these projects have been vetted by county staff and are worthwhile projects. Member Yerger asked about the design plan, and could it be used at any time? Mr. Scott answered that we only design for the amenities that we have funding for, so no money is wasted. We plan these parks to be phased-in for completion and it can take many years.

Project: Maracaibo Kidspace Park: Develop and implement a master plan to bring the park up to the standard of the Parks & Recreation Master Plan.

Proposal: Provide additional park amenities to meet the standards of the Parks & Recreation Master Plan with renovations that include master planning, three lighted sport courts/field, one large and two small pavilions, a new concession stand, a new park restroom, a community building, lighted parking, a 10-foot-wide trail.

Mr. Scott gave a brief overview of this small park which only has t-ball fields and a playground. The playground was created through a partnership with Leadership Charlotte that helped to raise the money. This proposal has to do with the Master Planning and reimagining of what it could look like based upon its size and community needs. It is located on Maracaibo, six blocks west of Harold Regional Park. A beautiful park and well used with lots of wooded property available, however we will keep a natural buffer between the park and the neighbors.

Member Yerger asked if all these parks will have ADA capabilities? Mr. Scott replied yes and that it is included in the standards of building. Member Tichy asked when was the last time anything was done with this park? Mr. Scott responded that it had not had a face lift in 10 to 15 years. Member Pears asked will there be an opportunity to phase this with Master Planning and Design followed by construction in Phase 2? Yes, Ms. Lewis remarked, if the master planning piece is part of a construction project it is eligible for sales tax funding. A planning piece without an infrastructure component in it would not be eligible for Sales Tax funding. Member Russell inquired about the size of the community building with restrooms, asking if the restrooms equaled 600-700 feet or was the entire building that square footage? Mr. Scott replied that 600-700 square feet was the building square footage (with restrooms) which encompassed the entire cost of 7.8 million for the project. Member Pears asked if Harold Avenue Park is totally built out? Mr. Scott replied affirmatively because it has run out of useable space, anything done here in the future would be a replacement. Member Pears asked about purchasing vacant land around the two parks to expand? Mr. Scott indicated that it was not feasible as it would just be bits and pieces and difficult to take over the road or other houses. Buying pieces here and there does not make sense for these two parks. Member Pears asked if building out Maracaibo is the only way to increase services in that area? Mr. Scott indicated the county has looked at purchasing tracts of land based on population growth looking out over 25 years.

Project: G.C. Herring Park Phase 2: Continuation of G.C. Herring Park master plan to bring the park up to the standard of the Parks & Recreation Master Plan.

Proposal: Continued renovation in Phase 2 that includes four small pavilions, RC tracks, additional lighted parking, fitness equipment, trails, a boardwalk, and a fishing pier.

Mr. Scott gave a description of the park, its past and current amenities, the location and the land around it. This park is out in West County with The American Legion Post nearby and the Veterans Memorial Park (we developed from the 2014 sales tax) adjacent to it. Super Star games were held there once to encourage people to buy property in Rotunda. The Phase 1 design phase was under the 2020 Sales Tax. Phase 2 will finish and complete the Master Plan process for this park. There were RC dirt tracks in the past and the community wants to bring them back, plus a drag strip concept. Boardwalks will be needed through the wetland areas as it is adjacent to state land, with water and a pier.

Member Tichy asked for further explanation of the walking paths and the different tracks. Member Yerger asked for the size of the entire park. Mr. Scott stated that the entire property was 50 acres but only 20 acres was being used for the actual park. Member Axelson asked if any of the parks are not used very much, in case we add amenities to a park that the residents do not utilize. Mr. Scott replied that some parks in our system have been decommissioned. General Development platted the county with tiny pockets of ½ to 1-acre parks. During the economic downturn in 2008 many were decommissioned, (no services or amenities) but they are still in county inventory. Ms. Lewis said this saves on maintenance costs across the county to have these parks decommissioned. Member Axelson inquired about active parks and concerningly asked, you would not bring inactive parks to us, would you? Mr. Scott said these are all active parks with active users. Adding amenities to parks bring in good people who do good things and keep properties from degrading. Member Matthews asked about the parking access to the drag strip track. Scott reminded her that expanded parking is being added to the park and the distance from the parking lot to travel with their RC cars is very short, a couple of hundred feet at most. Member Pears asked if there was a mechanism to track user data? Ms. Lewis said yes, we do. Mr. Scott explained a service called Placer AI that uses cell phone data to tell how many people are there, how long they stay, where they are coming from – it is a beautiful product, and we use it often. Member Pears asked does it track visitors and/or resident vs. visitor? Mr. Scott assumed so but had not utilized that part of its service. Ms. Lewis interjected that the Tourism department collects cell phone and credit card usage. Member Pears asked what the revenue streams are available to invest in these parks? Can we capture both user access in Charlotte County? Mr. Scott stated our parks are categorized by size. Regional Parks, due to their size bring in more tourists with more attractions and amenities. Not all parks are tourist drivers – community parks will bring people to it because of certain amenities. We have the only RC drag strip in SW Florida, and this will attract users. We use this real time data to make the recommendations to the BCC and can justify with actual numbers. Ms. Lewis commented that it helps to establish our level of service in the parks.

Project: Charlotte Sports Park – Increase paved parking at Charlotte Sports Park.

Proposal: The Charlotte Sports Park was renovated in 2006 but did not include paved parking of the main parking lot. Visitors to the facility are often exposed to water and mud in the grass parking lot. The objective is to add 800 paved parking spaces and 50 ADA accessible parking spaces at the Charlotte Sports Park.

Mr. Scott stated that this project is entirely devoted to addressing the swale grass parking system and the numerous times customers often travel through soft, wet grass, and muddy lanes with the potential

for their cars to get stuck. This proposal is to improve parking in the grassy areas and in the areas where players park.

The plans are to develop 800 paved parking spaces in the main lot and 50 paved spaces for the players. This improvement will increase the potential for other events to be scheduled at the Sports Park. Previously, permitting issues with SWFL Management made this difficult but the way is clear now to get the permitting. Member Russell inquired how many years do we have left on the contract with the Tampa Bay Rays for Spring Training? Mr. Scott respond until 2031. Member Vieira asked if the Rays sale affects anything. No, Mr. Scott replied, the Contract moves with them, and we are in good standing with them. Member Barrett said hopefully the third time is the charm as this has been on the Sales Tax list since 2014, taken off because there was potential for some type of partnership with the Rays. In 2020 it was on the list but did not make it forward according to Mr. Scott, but the Sports Park renovation did move forward with funding. Ms. Lewis stated all the seating, lighting has been replaced, and the pavilion behind the Tiki Bar was rebuilt. Several hurricanes caused damage and more delays, but funding is still available from the 2020 sales tax to complete the projects. Member Barrett inquired about minor leagues. Mr. Scott explained all the various levels of baseball leagues that use the field. Some games are free to the public interjected Ms. Lewis. Mr. Scott continued by saying we have organizations clamoring to use the field for youth-based tournaments so even if the Tampa Bay Rays leave Charlotte County there will still be demand for use of the fields and that usage can bring in one million dollars in economic impact. Member Matthews asked about the status of adding a turn lane on 776? Ms. Lewis said it is funded and in the FDOT construction window sometime in 2026. Mr. Scott remarked that the bad traffic is only 14 days a year and the event leaves 20 million dollars in economic impact to the county. There will be new turn lanes into the stadium as well as the fairgrounds across the street. Member Yerger inquired what other types of usage the park is of benefit throughout the year. Mr. Scott said it is used for Spring Training and other baseball leagues, baseball tours for youth, high school graduations, concerts, parking for the fairgrounds, weddings, movies on the field, Easter Services, and 5k runs even though the Rays have usage of the field through October. Member Pears asked about cash flow projections through 2028. Pears continued by asking Ms. Lewis about her recollections from Board discussions why this project did not make the cut. Ms. Lewis replied that in that context of time, they were discussing the turn lane with FDOT, the potential of a pedestrian crosswalk and the uncertainty about permitting. Between 2020 and now we have resolved the permitting issue. Member Barrett explained further Board discussions that she recalled regarding the impact of Covid and how the Board reviewed the projects between wants vs. needs which moved some projects from Tier I to Tier II. Ms. Lewis added that the Sports Park improvement project moved to Tier II and then the parking lot proposal was removed.

Project: Charlotte Harbor Event & Conference Center Parking Garage: The Charlotte Harbor Event and Conference Center does not have adequate parking for events and activities. The problem will increase as the City Marketplace property is developed, reducing available nearby parking.

Proposal: Ensure the Charlotte Harbor Event and Conference Center remains a suitable venue for events and activities for years to come by constructing a parking garage to provide approximately 325 parking spaces to meet the current and future needs of the Charlotte Harbor Event and Conference Center.

Mr. Scott provided some history of the Event Center which was built after Hurricane Charley with just surface parking. The need for a future two-level parking garage remained in the plans. The parking garage has not been designed yet, (there is no funding), but these example photos are a representation of what it could look like. The parking garage is needed because of the number of events held at the Event Center that exceed parking availability. This project was moved out of the 2020 sales tax proposal. We have had two joint conversations with the City of Punta Gorda about the need for this parking garage. Currently the parking lot has 246 spaces, for a facility with a square footage requiring 600 parking spaces. Member Russell asked how many spaces now and Scott replied 234 regular and 12 ADA spaces. Member Barrett mentioned that this was supposed to be a Phase 2 after they built the Event Center. Member Russell asked about the square footage of the building? Mr. Scott said it was 45,000 square feet. Member Axelson asked if there was any insight whether the added garage would help us to book more and larger events? Mr. Scott indicated affirmatively and added that we have two limitations: 1) Space inside the building and 2) Parking availability for events in the facility. The size of the building is good for this size of a community in comparison to other venues and cities. Member Axelson inquired if we were positioned to be one of the premier sites in the region to get added conferences. Mr. Scott stated that another local venue does not have enough event space so some of their events are being transferred to the Event Center. Mr. Scott indicated that more parking would allow for larger events. Member Bayne asked if the parking garage was being built on one or both sets of parking lots? Mr. Scott indicated that this still needs to be designed but the idea is to take over both bays of the parking lot. This covered parking will allow for rainless access to the building and events like car shows can be undercover and out of the hot sun. Member Yerger asked what is the footprint of the building and would there be some connection to the parking garage like a breezeway? Mr. Scott replied this still needs to be designed but the building is 45,000 square feet and considered a one tier building. Mr. Scott noted that the design would fall under the permitting and construction available in that area. Member Pears inquired about charging for parking and Mr. Scott said that was something to explore. Member Pears inquired (regarding the resilience portion of the project) if there had been any consideration of improving City of Punta Gorda parking and traffic congestion or was it just a discussion about building a two-deck garage? Mr. Scott replied that a two-deck garage is being built because that is what we can afford and is within height compliance in the area. Member Barrett asked if this was county property? Ms. Lewis interjected that yes, it is county owned land in the Punta Gorda City limit and permitting was under the city codes. Member Pears commented that the scope and number of parking is based on budget and not needs. Mr. Scott indicated that the budget gets us to the need, and we are not looking beyond. Ms. Lewis added we are not trying to address the parking issues in downtown Punta Gorda but the parking needs of the Event Center. General discussion continued about indoor usable space vs. how many parking spaces needed. Member Vieira asked about what happens to event parking when the structure is being built? Mr. Scott said that parking would be accommodated by offsite parking, using shuttles and limiting size of events during construction. Member Matthews made a point of reference there was already a City Market Place parking deck site plan that was sent to the City of Punta Gorda and approved by the Development Site Committee. Once this gets built it will assist with parking issues. Member Barret comment that you could rent the parking deck increasing its economic value and Member Pears added that fees to park could offset the construction. Member Yerger continued further discussion on parking space size in Florida. Mr. Scott commented that since we do not know the exact size of the structure, we are looking for a particular number of spaces and will design to it.

Focus Group Member Project Scoring: Ms. Lewis requested the Focus Group to complete today's scoring sheets and turn them into the staff from Fiscal.

Meeting Adjournment: Meeting concluded by consensus at 4:17 p.m. Next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, October 23, 2025 at 3:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Emily Lewis,
Charlotte County Deputy Administrator

Date Adopted: October 23, 2025

Minutes recorded by Andrea Yerger,
2026 Sales Tax Focus Group Administrative Assistant