



**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.
October 30, 2025**

Members Present: Eric Axelson, Donna Barrett, Lucienne Pears, Cindy Marsh-Tichy, Steve Vieira, Larry Yerger, Kathi Obendorfer, Gary Butler, and Mark Vianello.

Members Excused: Gary Bayne, Lynne Matthews, and Ray Laroche. Unexcused: Bob White and Sean McLaughlin.

Others Present: Tommy Scott, Director of Community Services, Travis Perdue, Director of Facilities Management, Kim Phillips, Financial Analyst, Francine Lisby, Assistant Budget Director, and Claire Jubb, Assistant County Administrator.

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 October 23, 2025 Minutes:

MOTION WAS MADE BY LUCIENNE PEARS, SECONDED BY KATHI OBENDORFER TO APPROVE AS PRESENTED THE OCTOBER 23, 2025 MINUTES. MOTION CARRIED 9:0.

Public Comment: Ms. Lewis opened the floor for Public Comment on Agenda items only. Jack VanderHeyden spoke to his inability to speak to the agenda with just bullet points and no information. He suggested that Public Comments should come after the presentations. Referring to the Cultural Center, Mr. VanderHeyden asked how much insurance money did the county receive and why weren't repairs done immediately to prevent mold? Betty Hansen spoke about the Cultural Center issue and encouraged the Focus Group to raise that project to a higher level of priority due to its importance in Charlotte County.

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: Bissett Park Phase 2: Continue Phase 2 of Park Master Plan to renovate the Bissett Park to meet the standards outlined in the Parks & Recreation Master Plan.

Proposal: Phase 2 includes replacing the restroom and building a 12-foot fishing pier; expanding the playground; and installing a 10-foot walking path.

Mr. Scott described Bissett Park which is located in Tropical Acres, south of Punta Gorda near Tucker's Grade/US 41. Phase 1 is completed and consisted of the master planning process and some amenities, such as removing the shuffleboard court and replacing it with a skate park and playground equipment. This is a beautiful piece of property, and the goal is to open it up further for more people to enjoy through the new walking trails. The restroom also is at its end of life and needs to be replaced. Member Yerger asked if there is a baseball park? Mr. Scott said there was an open field with a backstop (that can be field lined) but it is currently used as a multipurpose field for people to choose optional activities. Yerger asked about the length of the boardwalk and if it included the dock. Mr. Scott replied that the dock went beyond the boardwalk so that people could walk farther out into the water to fish. Member Pears asked Mr. Scott to speak about the walking path activities and public safety, such as using cameras for monitoring. Mr. Scott explained that where there are wooded walking paths staff site walk them. We look at slopes, the grades and terrains we need to avoid. Our standard walkway is ten feet wide, and we plan to install a hardscape surface. Safety is primarily the people using the park for good activities which keeps out bad activities. There is an active neighborhood association in this area we partner with along with the Sheriff's department. For crime prevention we use a line-of-sight environmental design such as keeping vegetation low enough to see over or around. Member Pears continued the discussion with her support of access to public lands and approved improving the park in a way that thinks about public safety, thinks of the neighborhood holistically and draws the right conclusions to correct potential issues if the park is designed correctly. Mr. Scott affirmed that after recent improvements to the park, vandalism has decreased significantly and less complaints have been received by community members. Member Pears commented that hearing about the environmental design and how it affects crime statistics is very useful for support of these park projects. Member Butler asked for an explanation of the CIP page. Mr. Scott explained the capital improvement program for the county and that these projects fall within the 6-year window so are included in the information provided. It shows how we build out budgetarily and our timeframe. Butler further asked how current projects are being funded now. Mr. Scott replied that the Capital Projects fund is funded by our millage rate, (one of the mechanisms used to fund capital projects), and that is where the original funding came from for the master planning and the construction phase already completed for this park. We have finished the projects that were funded and are now into the unfunded Phase 2. Member Vieira asked if the \$543,000 listed on the project sheet reflected what has already been spent? Mr. Scott replied affirmatively.

Project: Bissett Park Phase 3: Continue Phase 3 of Park Master Plan to renovate the Bissett Park to meet the standards outlined in the Parks & Recreation Master Plan.

Proposal: Phase 3 includes a new 50,000-sq. ft. recreation center with two gyms, three multipurpose rooms, one fitness room, a catering kitchen, locker rooms, a backup generator, storage, staff spaces, parking and required utilities.

Member Barrett asked what the flood zone rating was for this project? Mr. Scott reported that it was high and dry in the Green Zone. This project is to take advantage of this dry green zone to build a large multipurpose recreation center that also serves as an emergency shelter. This will be a two-story building with a second-floor track and fitness area. It is needed because of the growth in south county, and it is a prime location to build out a facility to be a storm shelter. The future growth of the area indicates a need for the recreation center but more importantly, the county needs emergency shelters as we have a deficit in storm sheltering. There are multiple outside opportunities for funding (such as through the hazard mitigation program) through the federal government. Parking is being planned for entrance/exit ease in being a point of distribution center for supplies after a storm with the assistance of the National Guard. Member Yerger asked if the location is above the flood plain. Mr. Scott replied everything out to US 41 is above the flood plain. The park is in a good location close to US 41, Tucker's Grade entrance at I-75 and a growing area of Charlotte County that has significant needs. Member Vianello asked if this shelter will be accessible for special needs and housing of animals? Mr. Scott replied, we are working on a special needs shelter option through a different project and property through our mitigation grant process. The potential special needs/animal housing shelter is more centrally located in the county. Member Tichy questioned whether there was a request for 1 or 2 vehicles. Just one replied Mr. Scott. Member Tichy also asked whether the back-up generator had enough fuel being buried? Mr. Scott explained that our standard is to size a generator to run the building for a significant time period. It is a large platform generator on a stand over diesel tanks for which we can service and fill with fuel. Member Pears asked how this relates to the public park plans of the major Master Planned Communities in the surrounding area? Mr. Scott replied that the Master Plan for parks has taken into consideration those future communities and the potential amenities they may have when planning our parks. We do have a requirement and obligation to provide park amenities according to our master plan regardless of what these communities will have in the future. Pears asked about the public schools in the area that are generally utilized as shelters, and will this recreation center/shelter be in lieu of using these schools? Ms. Lewis responded that we do not use the schools in south county for sheltering due to their flood elevation. Member Vieira asked what the capacity of the shelter would be, and Mr. Scott replied approximately 3,000. FEMA has a requirement of so many feet per occupant and this will be measured after the building is completed. Member Butler asked for an explanation of the parking. Mr. Scott explained there are two parking pods. Member Pears asked about the building design and the opportunity of being innovative in back-up power design. Mr. Scott replied that this was a quick concept design developed with Emergency Management but once this project is approved it will go through the complete design phase exercise. Ms. Lewis added that if the application for HMGP is successful there may be some grant requirements for the design by the federal government – that might be the only limitations. Member Yerger asked about costs for shelter supplies. Mr. Scott said that those are all ancillary supplies, we resupply those needs every year from another fund. Those costs in the proposal are only for the recreation center and its operation.

Project: Tringali Community Center Replacement: The Tringali Community Center has reached its end of life. To continue to provide an updated facility to meet the needs of the community from a recreational, public meeting, programmatic space as well as to meet the standards outlined in the Parks & Recreation Master Plan and a new facility is needed.

Proposal: Two large multi-purpose rooms, a full catering kitchen, additional office space and storage.

Tringali Community Center, located in west county, is on an access road off of 776. The recreation center, library, outdoor park amenities and community center have all reached their end-of-life cycle. Recently it was a prime location for FEMA to assist with the aftermath of Hurricanes Ian, Helene and Milton. This FEMA hub was used for almost a year. At this site the property has easy access to 776 and was useful as a point of distribution for supplies through multiple storms. The community center was a great resource for storm recovery as well as for the arts where the space is used for community plays, dance recitals and weddings. There is a noted lack of public meeting space in west county. Member Yerger asked if the plan is to raze the building and construct a new one, will you increase the footprint? Mr. Scott replied to him that the actual footprint will come through the design phase. There is a retention pond on the property that must be considered in the design of the building. Yerger asked if it was desirable to increase the footprint and Mr. Scott replied that the size now was adequate and serves its purpose. Member Barrett commented on all the services provide here and at the recreation center. She continued by stating Charlotte County was able to offer many more services after the storms to the community. The building department even had a temporary office there. Member Butler asked what size of the building can we get for \$5,600,000? Mr. Scott replied, we are building "like for like" and it would be approximately 3,000 square feet.

Project: William R. Gaines Jr. Veterans Memorial Park: Implementation of the William R. Gaines Jr. Veterans Memorial Park Master Plan. William R. Gaines Jr. was a 1981 graduate of Charlotte High School and a Marine, killed in action while serving with the U.S. component of the U.N. multinational peacekeeping force in Beirut, Lebanon. The goal of the park is to provide a testament to the sacrifices of all veterans and first responders and be a place where neighbors and families can come together to experience the beauty of nature. The William R. Gaines Jr. Veterans Foundation is contributing an initial donation of \$500,000 cash and in-kind services.

Proposal: Includes a 2,400 sq. ft. inclusive/accessible splash pad, 700 sq. ft. community building, a restroom, and a small pavilion.

Originally the park was called Sunrise Park and was acquired through the 1998 Sales Tax revenue and also by using county capital funding and grants. It is located on Edgewater Drive and is about 50 acres with 15-20 acres upland and the rest consisting of wetlands on the harbor. This is the last phase to finish the Master Plan for this park. The Gaines Memorial Foundation partnership has provided a variety of components like a Memorial Tower, ADA accessible kayak launch, two other memorials, and additional signage. A Public private partnership with FPL has provide a solar canopy over a parking pod and solar trees. The 2020 Sales Tax funded new bocce, pickleball and tennis courts. A trail system and a future raised boardwalk is planned over the wetlands. Member Barrett asked why only 600 to 700 feet for the community building, saying there is a need for a larger meeting space, especially for Veterans? Mr. Scott explained that the building was modeled after the Girl Scout building at McGuire

Park upsized to become a standard size in our Master Planning. Community parks now all get this size of a community building as other regional park facilities in the community have larger meeting spaces that can be used. Member Butler further explained (from the Veteran's perspective) their planned use of the Memorial Tower in the park and the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Punta Gorda for educational events for our school aged children. He agreed that there is never enough space, but the smaller size keeps the locations special. Member Pears asked for an explanation of the past and current fundraising aspects of this park. Mr. Scott explained the Public Private partnership with the Gaines family for the Memorial Tower. The other fundraising partnership with them was the ADA kayak launch which is now complete. There is a ribbon cutting ceremony planned. Member Barrett asked if this is the last phase or is there more land to be developed. Mr. Scott replied yes, we have built out as much as we can in the land that we have left.

Mr. Travis Purdue, Director of Facility Management was present today to give an overview of the Cultural Center Replacement project on today's Agenda.

Project: Cultural Center Replacement: Design and construct a replacement Cultural Center, including a replacement of the Port Charlotte Library with Historical Center components.

Proposal: This is a high-priority project of the Board of County Commissioners. A state-of-the-art facility that will incorporate the Port Charlotte Library and replace the existing Cultural Center.

Mr. Purdue gave background information regarding this project. The BCC has already approved funding the Master Planning and programming portion of this project. We are 75% completed with this phase which has been conducted with the direction of our consultant. At the end of this year or early in 2026 the results will be brought back for the review of the BCC. A large portion of this initial master plan was devoted to public input and all that information was presented to the BCC and is available for public consumption. There are several goals we want to accomplish with the Cultural Center: the first being the site. The site of the Cultural Center is an issue for rebuilding today because of the lack of storm water. This element of storm water capacity was not required when it was first built. The site has a 100,000 square feet footprint and is a major component of our planning today. Second, a consultant for the theater was engaged in our master planning process which helped us identify where the theatre should be located in our community and how it should be operated. Third, we combined the Historical Center into the Cultural Center and the Library projects. We are also looking into a Public Private partnership to fund these projects. The demolition is estimated to cost \$2 million, design to cost \$3.5 million and the building cost to be \$55 million. Originally, the Cultural Center was constructed in 1968, with 13 additions over the years, the last being in 2002. The Cultural Center had a 40-year lease with the county signed in 2000. The county held ownership of the exterior with the contracted non-profit managing the internal components. The Center was closed and returned to the county in 2021 at which time the county began the evaluation of the building and the components such as plumbing and air conditioning. Hurricane Ian struck in 2022 and destroyed a majority of the campus. The damage was covered by insurance and after the staff went through the mitigation process it was determined the site wasn't a total loss, so partial stabilizing was done. The hardest wind damage was to the theatre which is a higher structure. Damage from Hurricane Milton last year finally claimed the

site as a total loss. Since the county always maintained the library (and it was protected by the theater), it was able to be stabilized and reopened quickly. But the library structure also is at its end of life.

Member Barrett commented that the Cultural Center and the monies raised to build it was a gift to the community from a nonprofit and spoke about the history and what it means to many people. She further stated that this is the third time the Cultural Center has come before the Sales Tax committee and the first time it is being presented by the county, the nonprofit that failed presented it in the past. Mr. Purdue agreed that there is much emotion tied to the Cultural Center and lamented that the structure was not built to be more resilient. He stated that is the direction of the BCC to rebuild it to be more resilient. Member Vieira asked about the insurance claim process and if the claim was amended after the county evaluated what the initial adjusters could not see? Mr. Purdue said that it was up to us to do secondary evaluations and report that to the insurance company. It is called a Supplemental claim and documentation that we filed supports the claim. Vieira commented that the additional storms probably compounded that claim. Mr. Purdue said yes, the value of the claim exceeded the cost to rebuild the buildings which caused it to be deemed a total loss. Member Yerger asked if the idea is to raze all the structures? Mr. Purdue said yes, and it will be a phased approach with different options on what to build and when. We are also evaluating the highest and best use of the property. The property has value to the community. Member Axelson commented the annual operating costs seem low, does that not include library salaries? Ms. Lewis reported those numbers are already in our budget. Is there talk of merging this library with Mid-County Library that is close by asked Axelson? Ms. Lewis indicated that both are heavily used libraries, and they serve a varied and distinct population and would not be considered for a merger. The newly remodeled Mid County Library opens early in 2026 and would support the needs of the community while the Port Charlotte Library is rebuilt. Member Butler commented on his experience with the Military Museum and the need to have a business plan in place and the importance of understanding the demographics and needs of the people using either a museum or Cultural Center. It is a good process to be phased and have a business model in place for the future. This is an incredible opportunity for the community if the funding can be obtained. Mr. Purdue agreed that there a lot of similarities between the two. He added that the planning of the Cultural Center requires more input and conversations with the community. Member Pears asked what the flood zone of the property and was told it was orange. She continued by saying we should look to the future needs, the economically challenged neighborhood. What is the highest and best use? Is it affordable housing? Master planning of the entire site will be a good process with looking towards the needs of the whole. Pears asked about the total projected revenue for the 2026 Sales Tax. Ms. Lewis said \$226 million (yet to be determined if we stay with six years or extend longer). With the BCC direction of 50% towards infrastructure this project cost could take up a third of the remaining income. Member Barrett cautioned the use of the term "affordable housing" to replace the Cultural Center. The image of the Cultural Center is more of a feeling. It is a place where you always feel welcome. A live Facebook for example. Ms. Lewis said the BCC will make the final decision on the master plan for the project and the committee is tasked with whether to include this in their recommendation only. Member Yerger commented that the usage of this site needs to be where people who need it can use it. Mr. Purdue ended by saying the next presentation to the BCC will be at the end of the year and to please watch for that information.

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 4:27 p.m. Next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, November 6, 2025 at 3:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Emily Lewis,
Charlotte County Deputy Administrator

Date Adopted: _____

 11/6/25

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