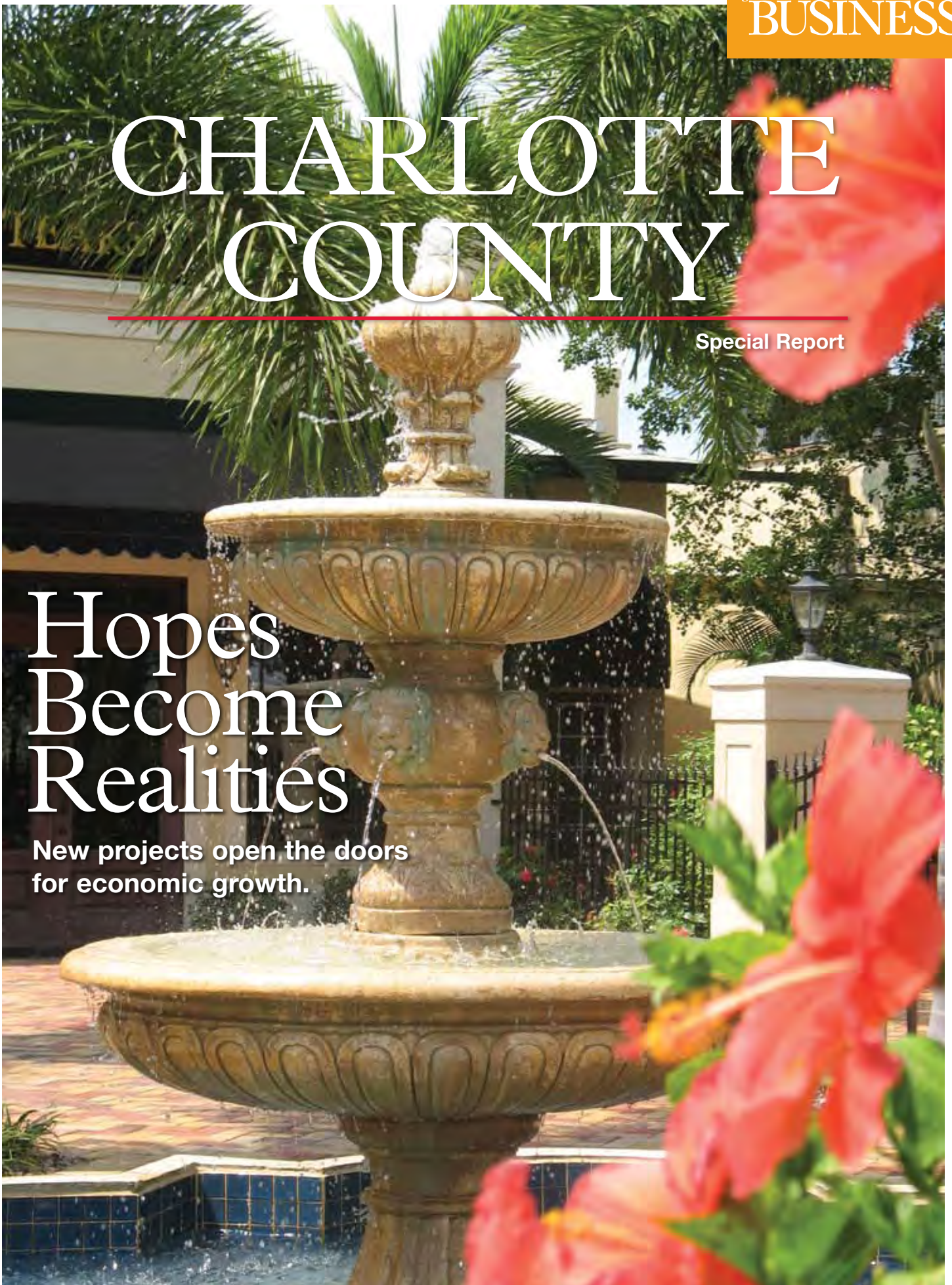


CHARLOTTE COUNTY

Special Report

Hopes Become Realities

New projects open the doors
for economic growth.



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Cover photo courtesy of Enterprise Punta Gorda

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BUSINESS

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Growth Starters

Major projects are leading progress in Charlotte County.

By Beth Luberecki

For Charlotte County, 2007 could go down as a banner year for the business sector. Two major deals were finalized, and downtown Punta Gorda saw significant action toward recovery.

Two and a half years after Publix first announced its plans to build a distribution center in Charlotte County, the Lakeland-based grocery giant finally completed its purchase of the land for the site this past June, paying \$7.67 million for approximately 87 acres at the Enterprise Charlotte Airport Park.

According to spokesperson Shannon Patten, Publix still hasn't decided how big the much-anticipated facility will be, how many jobs will be created or what geographic areas it will serve. "The scope is still being developed," she says. "But we definitely need more warehouse space, and it will be designed to service our stores more efficiently."

"It will have a major impact on employment opportunities in Charlotte County, and that will spill over to additional housing needs and additional economic development from other businesses that may want to locate here because of Publix being in the area," says Debrah Forester, Charlotte County's redevelopment manager and interim economic development director. "It will definitely put Charlotte County on other people's radar screens."

MOVING ON MURDOCK

Another long-awaited project that took off in 2007 is the Murdock Village development along U.S. 41 and S.R. 776. In July, the county struck a deal with Kitson & Partners to redevelop the site into a walkable, mixed-use community that will serve as a town center for Port Charlotte. Kitson agreed to pay the county \$72 million in scheduled payouts plus 1.5 percent of the gross purchase price of the site's market-rate residential units.

"At the [home] pricing we're proposing now, it really makes the purchase price \$90 million, with the potential, if the market gets better, for the county to earn additional money," says Sydney Kitson, chairman and CEO of Kitson & Partners. "If Murdock Village does well, the county does well. It puts everybody on the same side and working together."

Kitson's plan for the site calls for a mix of almost 4,000 single-family, multifamily and workforce-housing residential units and some 1.5 million square feet of commercial space. Space also exists for an elementary school, churches, regional park and a Charlotte County branch of Florida Gulf Coast University.



Town center: After several false starts, the county tapped Kitson & Partners to develop Murdock Village.

Publix won't be the only one to benefit from the deal, which boosters tout as the largest economic development project in Charlotte County history. "The whole community benefits, with good jobs, an increase in the tax base and a great economic impact," says Kathleen Coppola, chairwoman of the Charlotte County Airport Authority.

COURTESY OF WILSONMILLER



Room to grow: The events center (above) will provide space Punta Gorda hasn't had before for conferences and events. **Rising Sun:** The Sunloft Center, now under construction, will bring a mix of retail and office space to Punta Gorda.



"It's a true urban redevelopment project right here in Port Charlotte," says Kitson. "I really believe it's going to become the heartbeat of the county."

The county began buying the land for Murdock Village in 2001 in order to deal with a swath of essentially abandoned lots that had been platted by the General Development Corp. in the 1960s. "It hindered the county's ability to develop in the smart-growth, sustainable-type development everyone has been promoting in the last 10-plus years in the state," says Forester. "Murdock Village allows the county to create that center, that destination point for the community as a whole. It will have a big economic impact, and I would expect to see a spillover effect on the surrounding area outside of Murdock Village."

Other developers had shown interest in working on the site, but all previous deals had fallen through, most recently with Naples-based Stock Development. County officials hope the deal with Kitson will be the one that finally gets the project going.

"The county put in a substantial investment in purchasing the property," says Forester. "It had the option to wait and see if the market turned around, but it was also faced with the concern that it needed to move forward. Kitson made a commitment to the county, and its vision is consistent with the county's vision for Murdock Village."

BABCOCK POTENTIAL

Kitson & Partners is already well

known in these parts for the 17,000-acre Babcock Ranch development it plans. That project is making its way through the permitting process, and, according to Kitson, "everything is moving along well."

"We're in the final design phase of our first village," he says. "It's very exciting to start to see this come to reality. We're starting to see the roads, path systems, all the things we've been talking about starting to become a reality."

Babcock Ranch has the potential to bring thousands of jobs to the area, some of which will be connected to the FGCU environmental research center that will be located there. Kitson & Partners gave the land and \$3 million to FGCU, which received a matching grant from the state to build the 25,000-square-foot facility. According to Kitson, biotech companies and businesses in related fields have expressed interest in locating near the research center.

"There are quite a few opportunities we have to attract businesses [to Babcock], and the research center could be a part of the catalyst to make that happen," he says.

The Scripps Research Institute has plans to open a Florida campus in Jupiter in 2009 and that, along with the FGCU center, could lure firms to the region. "Some companies that might be too small and can't afford [the East Coast] might be drawn to Charlotte County," says Julie Mathis, executive director of the Charlotte County Chamber of Commerce. "Because there's going to

be so much of the [Babcock Ranch] community that's environmentally sensitive, I can see a lot of different kinds of businesses locating there because [it will] have a built-in lab."

NEW LIFE FOR PUNTA GORDA

The City of Punta Gorda has also been working to attract businesses to its downtown, and several projects under way there seem poised to do just that. One is the Sunloft Center, currently under construction at the corner of Taylor Street and West Marion Avenue. The four-story, mixed-use project includes restaurant and retail space on the first level, office space on the second and third floors, and 15 residential units on the top level. The exterior will feature about two dozen different façades made with a variety of building materials, so it doesn't feel like "just one large building," says Ann Schulz, broker for residential sales and leasing for the property. Completion is slated for May 2008, and several businesses, including an Italian eatery, are in line to move in.

"This building is amazingly well built," says Ron Thomas, executive director of Enterprise Punta Gorda, a nonprofit business and community development organization. "It raises the bar for new people who want to come into the community. We can point to that and say, 'This is the kind of structure and architecture we want.'"

Also under construction is the new Charlotte County Events Center, which could help attract businesses

and visitors to the area. The renovation of the historic 1920s-era courthouse is moving along and should be completed in 2008. "It had become an eyesore, but it's now going back to its original architectural configuration," says Thomas. "It's going to be a very nice-looking building when it's complete."

Charlotte Development Corp. is reviewing three concept plans for its City Marketplace development proposed for downtown Punta Gorda, and after finalizing those, it will begin talks with the City. The site, up to 550,000 square feet for mixed-use development, will feature a hotel, residential condos, and retail and office space. Company officials hope to begin marketing by the first quarter of 2008 and construction by the third quarter of 2008.

"That will eventually be the cornerstone of [downtown Punta Gorda's] success," says Thomas. "People are excited and looking forward to seeing some development there."

Charlotte Development Corp. is reviewing concept plans for its City Marketplace development.

"Downtown is happening," says Mathis. "Because Punta Gorda was so devastated by Hurricane Charley, particularly the downtown, to see the rebuilding is just giving people a more positive attitude that things are moving forward. Right after the storm we kept hearing it was going to be three to five years [before recovery]. So to see dirt

moving and concrete floors going in is just very positive."

The City of Punta Gorda is also in the process of applying for the Florida Main Street program, a revitalization initiative that Thomas says could help attract developers and businesses downtown. The designation would serve as "an event generator and pedestrian-excitement generator for the downtown area. It gets people downtown, and when they're downtown they will spend money at merchants and restaurants.

"People who have an interest in commercial investments are looking very carefully at our community right now," continues Thomas. "When we start to see some vertical construction on the two hotels, the events center, and the new parking garage [at Herald Court], I think we will see some fairly significant commercial development—and frankly, that's not far away. It's an exciting time." **gb**

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Ready for Takeoff

Airport commercial district is positioned for industry.

The Charlotte County Airport is emerging as a hub for the county's commercial and light-industrial future—which is approaching fast.

Charlotte County commissioners, with the support of the Charlotte County Airport Authority, created a zoning overlay in 2003 to help ensure the land surrounding the airport was developed in ways that would attract light industry and other business to the county. The county recognized it as a transportation hub east of Punta Gorda with its proximity to a railroad line and easy access to U.S. 41, U.S. 17 and I-75, Commissioner Adam Cummings recalls. What the county didn't want

to see was residential, heavy industry or other land uses incompatible with the airport.

"We didn't expect any [immediate] blossoming, but we are now seeing early signs of its success," Cummings says.

Between the airport property and private property owners looking to develop their own commercial and industrial parks, determining who owns what can get confusing, says Gary Quill, the airport authority's executive director. The airport owns less than 2,000 acres, but the entire enterprise commercial zoning district includes 3,800 to 4,000 acres.

Normally, the airport leases its space, but it recently sold 87 acres

to Publix for a distribution center, bringing possibly as many as 300 new jobs to the county. It's a major coup for the airport, and may be only a beginning.

Rick Treworgy and Bruce Laishley of Southwest Land Developers sold half the lots in preconstruction sales of their 370-acre Airport Commerce Center within three weeks.

"We didn't realize there was that much pent-up demand," Treworgy says. "[Charlotte's] location for distributors from Tampa to Naples is a good central location, and our costs are a little bit less than those north and south of us."

—Steve Reilly

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Tourist Attractions

There are many of new reasons to visit Charlotte County.

By Beth Luberecki

When Hurricane Charley stormed into town, it did a number on the local tourism industry, destroying hotels and other accommodations and scaring visitors away from the area. Three years later, things are looking up, with a number of new hotels scheduled to open and new attractions promising to attract visitors.

"We are undergoing a growth spurt in terms of hotel infrastructure," says

will ultimately be the gateway to Punta Gorda, so I think it has tremendous potential for us from a tourism perspective. [And it] will be instrumental in attracting additional hotel properties to the area."

Hotel rooms will also be needed to house the fans who are expected to travel to Charlotte County to attend Tampa Bay Devil Rays spring training games, starting in 2009. The stadium at the Charlotte Sports Park is set for a \$27 million renovation, with plans calling for all-new seating, a 360-degree concourse, a new 40,000-square-foot clubhouse for the Devil Rays, and improvements to the main stadium field and practice fields at the site.

The Devil Rays' move to Charlotte County is part of an effort to expand the team's fan base, and the county anticipates welcoming fans from near and far. "It'll be a huge economic engine for the county," says Andrew Baker, director of facilities, construction and maintenance for Charlotte County.

Devil Rays fans who live outside the Sunshine State could have an easier time getting to the area if scheduled commercial airline service returns to the Charlotte County Airport, a possibility that's on the radar screen. "That would be a significant change for us and would bring in visitors who previously had used other nearby airports," says Bovell.

Though no specific airline has been named yet, some have speculated it could be Skybus. The carrier focuses on secondary airports in cities such as Greensboro, N.C., and Kansas City, Mo., and charges ultra-low fares (some as low as \$10) by letting customers pay



In the game: The Charlotte Sports Park, set for \$27 million in renovations, will be the spring training site for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays.

Becky Bovell, director of the Charlotte County Visitor's Bureau. In the next two years, some 500 new hotel rooms will be added to the county's inventory, with projects including downtown Punta Gorda's Wyvern Hotel and Harbor Inn developments. The first new hotels to open since Charley should be up and running by this fall: the 79-room Sleep Inn at I-75 and Kings Highway, and the 86-room Microtel Inn & Suites at U.S. 41 and Gardner Drive in Port Charlotte.

The added hotel rooms will support a number of other new developments in the county, such as the \$19 million events center under construction in downtown Punta Gorda. Scheduled to be completed in September of 2008, the 43,500-square-foot facility will be twice the size of the hurricane-damaged Memorial Auditorium it is replacing and will be outfitted to meet the needs of 21st century conferences and events.

The events center's larger size and location along the Peace River should help lure business groups and organizations locally and from outside the area for everything from conferences and expos to sporting events and fundraising dinners. "It will enable us to enter a brand-new market that we never have been able to access before," Bovell says. "In terms of destination awareness and additional expenditures, it will be a significant boon to the area. I believe the events center

à la carte for services and by automating as much as possible. Bovell says the Charlotte County Airport has what it needs to support commercial airline service, especially with its new terminal coming online.

Traveling to Charlotte County by boat has also gotten easier with the opening of the Laishley Park Municipal Marina in Punta Gorda. "People are using it all the time," says Julie Mathis, executive director of the Charlotte County Chamber of Commerce. Previously, the county's only transient marina was at Fishermen's Village. The new marina offers 85 boat slips, a public boat launch and ship's store. Future plans call for a restaurant and mooring field as well as landscaping improvements to Laishley Park.

Bovell believes that the Florida Military Heritage Museum planned for a site near the airport will also lure




Waterfront attraction: A new municipal marina has opened at Laishley Park.

visitors to the area. She's hoping the 40,000-square-foot, \$7 million facility will be built in the next few years. "In the tourism business, military heritage museums are a tremendous draw, particularly in this area of the country, where there are so many retired military and veterans," she says.

A healthy tourism sector is important to Charlotte County's economy, Bovell says. It generates around \$300 million in direct and indirect expenditures each year and more than \$19

million in sales tax revenues from the approximately 300,000 visitors who visit the area annually.

"Tourism is the single most productive industry in the county in terms of generating revenues and income," Bovell says. "I think all of the things happening are going to contribute to raising the level of awareness for Charlotte Harbor, and if we manage that growth properly, then it will benefit everyone, residents and visitors alike." 

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Safe Haven

Training facility would boost homeland security.

Charlotte County could soon play a major role in helping governments prepare for disasters of all kinds. A Homeland Security training and research center called the Grove has been proposed for 2,000 to 3,000 acres near C.R. 74 and S.R. 31 in eastern Charlotte County, and it has the support of a number of local and state officials.

According to Stephen Alexander, CEO and president of the private company backing it, the \$100 million-plus facility would be the largest of its kind and would draw first-responders such as firefighters, police officers, federal agents and military personnel from all over the country. "We will

be setting the gold standard for homeland-security training research and education," Alexander says. "For the first time in a controlled environment, homeland-security groups from different disciplines can practice joint-force exercises. We're creating a high level of reality-scenario-based training."

The project is expected to begin the permitting process by early 2008. Plans call for a fire-training center, a subtropical forensics lab, an area replicating an urban environment and more.

A Fort Myers resident, Alexander devised the concept for the Grove following the Sept. 11 attacks, and he was pleasantly surprised to find a spot in his own back yard that could house such a facility.

Stephen Alexander



"The county will have tremendous bragging rights when it's up and running," he says.

—Beth Luberecki

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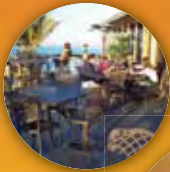
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Leading by Example

Bruce Laishley is making his mark.

By Beth Luberecki

Sitting on the counter of the ship's store at the new city marina at Punta Gorda's Laishley Park, a flier calls redfish anglers to compete for a \$25,000 first prize in an October tournament: the "Richest Redfish Challenge." The entry fee is \$700, and for an additional \$15, entrants can get a dinner ticket. Although Laishley Marine sponsors the event, the flier directs that checks be made payable to The Good Shepherd Day School in Punta Gorda.

This isn't the first fundraiser Laishley Marine owners Bruce and Barbara Laishley have staged to benefit the private school. The Laishleys' fundraisers have generated more than \$130,000 for the school's new building and classroom furnishings, even though their children transferred to other schools.

"My friends like to kid me that we run [Laishley Marine] for our fundraisers," Bruce says.

The Laishley name is well known here. Bruce is the son of former Punta Gorda Mayor Phil Laishley, for whom a city park is named, and Bruce has taken up the baton as a community and business leader.

Bruce, 50, grew up in Punta Gorda. His father, who arrived in Charlotte County in 1951, bought land along Burnt Store Road and launched his businesses in lumber, animal seed and nursery.

In the 1960s, when Charlotte County saw General Development Corp. and other developers beginning to transform the county from a rural to suburban

landscape, Phil Laishley saw the opportunities in commercial landscaping.

"He was one of the smartest men I've known," Bruce says of his father. He credits his father with teaching him business savvy and the importance of advertising and marketing. "By advertising, I don't just mean advertising in the newspaper or radio," Bruce says. "I mean you have to advertise and promote yourself and your company. You can be the smartest guy with the best ideas, but what if you can't communicate it to anybody?"

Even before he graduated Charlotte High School in 1974, Bruce started his own business, B & B Auto Parts—thanks to backing by an uncle. But when Phil Laishley died in 1975, Bruce went to work with his mother, Bette, running the commercial nursery and five other businesses his father started.

With the emergence in the 1980s and 1990s of Home Depot and the other big-box discount stores, Bruce recognized it would be hard to compete, so he took night courses in real estate and other subjects at Edison College in Charlotte County. That's where he met Barbara. They now have three children, ages eight to 13, and are partners in business.

In 1993, when the nearest marine-parts stores were in Fort Myers or Sarasota, he and Barbara started Laishley Marine, which Barbara now manages.

Bruce was also active in real estate and commercial development. In 1987, he and Rick Terworgy, who also grew up in Punta Gorda, teamed up to form Southwest Land Developers. The devel-



Hooked: Bruce Laishley, pictured with wife Barbara and their three children, put Charlotte County on the redfish fishing tournament circuit.

opment company had a construction-material landfill, which generated half of the company's revenue stream. They recently sold the landfill, and although Bruce won't divulge the selling price, he says the sale enabled him and Terworgy to turn their attention to other projects, including their 370-acre industrial Airport Commerce Park.

The industrial park, adjacent to the Charlotte County Airport, is part of the 3,800- to 4,000-acre commercial zoning district. Laishley and Terworgy invested close to \$10 million for the installation of roads, water, sewer and storm water-retention facilities, fiber-optic and telephone lines in their park, all of which are scheduled for completion in October. They've already sold half of the lots in their park.

"We're probably one of the biggest landowners in the [commercial overlay district] besides the airport," Bruce says. "When the economy slowed down, we kept going.

"This property is 100 percent paid for," he adds. "As soon as we started selling lots, we paid off a \$3 million loan."

Bruce would like the City of Punta Gorda to move its public works and utilities facilities to the industrial park. He proposed a land swap there for 17 acres of the city's Henry Street properties, where the public works, utilities and other city facilities suffered heavy dam-

age from Hurricane Charley in 2004. The Henry Street location is a gateway to Punta Gorda Isles, one of the city's deed-restricted, upscale residential communities, and city officials have suggested it might be better suited for mixed-use development than rebuilding what was lost.

In response, Bruce presented to the City Council a proposal that Southwest Land Developers build two- and three-story buildings with a mix of residential units (including workforce housing) and medical and neighborhood offices on the property. City Council was expected to consider the proposal in September.

Even with high-profile development projects that involve public-private cooperation, Bruce has avoided major zoning and other controversies. He says he doesn't believe in aggravating opposition when solutions can be found.

He is known for bringing inspiration from elsewhere to Punta Gorda—always with the intention of doing it better. In 2000, Bruce had the idea that Punta Gorda would be ideal for national redfish fishing tournaments. He flew to Texas for an ESPN-televised redfish tournament to see "what they did and how [Punta Gorda] could step it up a few notches." The tournament would benefit Laishley Marine, but he believed it could also be a boon to the city's business and community at large.

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“Bruce was responsible for bringing attention to it from the outset,” says Becky Bovell, Charlotte County’s tourism director. Although such tournaments were in their infancy, she says, “Bruce could see its potential.”

Bruce did much to ensure that first festival was a success. Besides investing his own money, he worked hands-on in preparation.

The goal was to transform the fishing tournament into a community event, too. Organizers made sure there were activities and vendors to attract crowds, and officials and participants now compare the Punta Gorda stop on their tournament trail to the Masters golf tournament at Augusta, Ga., Bovell says. The Oh Boy! Oberto Redfish Cup organizers have since made Punta Gorda a regular stop on the tour circuit. It generates at least \$250,000 in direct spending, fills 900 to 1,500 hotel and motel rooms, and the national exposure for the city and county is worth about \$100,000, she says.

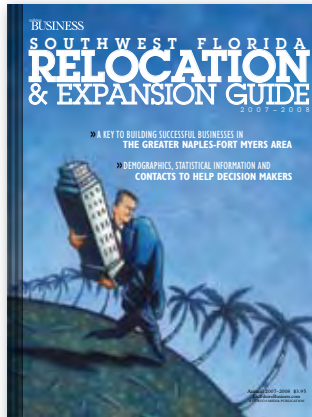
“Bruce has a Midas touch; everything he touches turns to gold, and businesspeople would be fools not to follow in his footsteps,” says Bob Carpenter, public information officer for the Charlotte County Sheriff’s Office and former executive director of the Punta Gorda Business & Community Alliance, a precursor of the Punta Gorda Chamber of Commerce. He commends Bruce not only for his business prowess, but also for his commitment to the community.

In the first year of the annual Punta Gorda Block Party, which just saw its 21st celebration, Bruce raised money for the event, and served on its board for the next 13 years. In its earlier years, revenues from the block party helped fund For the Love of Kids, a nonprofit effort to serve meals on weekends to 60 or more disadvantaged children—a program that has since taken off on its own.

“Bruce has always been involved in the community,” Carpenter says. “He has the ability to get the right people together for the right project.” **gb**

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