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Punta Gorda chips in on higher education study

By GREG MARTIN
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PUNTA GORDA — The group Team Punta Gorda is poised to take the first step on the long road toward bringing a higher education campus to the city of Punta Gorda by launching a feasibility study.

And the City Council joined the effort Wednesday, by voting unanimously to contribute \$2,000 toward the \$14,334 cost of

the study.

"I think \$2,000 (for the study) would be a sound investment," said Howard Kunik, city manager.

He added that a study of higher education opportunities is a goal in the city's strategic plan for economic development.

Team Punta Gorda, a business booster group, would contribute \$7,334 and Global Campus Management, a business

based in Sydney, Australia, that recruits students from around the world to its client campuses in Australia, New Zealand and the United States, would contribute \$5,000.

Tom Kerr, chairman of Team Punta Gorda's higher education committee and president of U.S. operations for Global Campus Management, suggested the city contribute to the study. That way, the city would

have "skin in the game," Kerr wrote in a recent e-mail to Kunik.

"The goal would be to determine if a higher education campus would be a fit with Punta Gorda, and if it is, what kind of school would it be?" said Bill Hughes, a member of Team Punta Gorda's higher-ed committee.

Kerr said he has met with

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officials at Edison State College, Florida Gulf Coast University and other colleges to determine if they were interested in considering locating a campus in the city. None were, he said. Edison has a Charlotte campus south of the city.

Kerr said he believes establishing a school that would attract students from out of state or abroad would provide more economic benefits than a satellite campus. The out-of-state students would bring new spending to the area, he said.

Punta Gorda's location in Southwest Florida would make it ideal, he said. It's warm weather is just one draw, he said.

He pointed out

Florida's elderly population creates a demand for medical education. Charlotte County's airport provides opportunities for aviation studies. And Charlotte Harbor offers marine biology or environmental studies.

"I think, if you're living in Boston or Minnesota right now, Florida would be in the top five (school choices)," he added.

Kerr said Team Punta Gorda will decide in the next three months whether to commission the study or conduct it in-house.

Establishing a higher education facility would help diversify the economy, wrote Terry Walker, president of American Advisory Group Inc., a consultant that is also advocating the study.

American Advisory Group suggested the study as an "incremental step with a modest investment" toward the long-term goal of establishing a campus. The study would provide "tangible results to circulate to groups," Walker said.

The study would describe various types of schools and academic programs, review Punta Gorda's demographics and project university startup and operating costs. A list of potential sites would be included.

Some five years ago, FGCU proposed a satellite campus off U.S. 17, but that site was rejected by the County Commission because it was outside the urban service area.

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