

VIEWPOINT

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OUR VIEW

Teamwork high on city, county joint meeting list

OUR POSITION: Joint meeting highlights partnerships, provides chance to discuss MPO.

When the Punta Gorda City Council and the Charlotte County Commission gather for a joint meeting Friday in Murdock, the predominant theme will be partnerships. All four agenda items address projects or policies in which teamwork between the two local governments and/or private sector entities was, is or will be vital. The good news for the city and county and their residents is that for the most part these partnerships have been very productive, with all indications that they will continue to be.

One need not go back too far in local history to find examples when that was not the case. The city and county clashed over issues large and small throughout the

1990s. The site of the new Justice Center, the widening of Aquí Esta Boulevard, the makeup of the Punta Gorda Community Redevelopment Agency board, comprehensive planning, Laishley Park, a fuel pipeline proposal, utility connections, recycling are all among the contentious issues that have roiled relations over the years.

Underscoring how the relationship has improved since those disputes arose is a county update on the progress of the \$10.4 million Aquí Esta project. In an editorial written in 1998, we referred to the "ancient dispute" over the road that links U.S. 41 to Bal Harbor Boulevard in Punta Gorda Isles. On Friday, the county will report that the project is on time and on budget, with only about 10 percent of the job left to be done. Barring delays, the job is slated for a February finish.

Punta Gorda City Manager Howard Kunik's presentation "Results through Collaboration: The Power of Partnerships" is an encore performance from November's Team Punta Gorda annual meeting.

Kunik will highlight public and private sector efforts and results, ranging from local nonprofits volunteering for landscaping work to multimillion-dollar federal grants. It may seem obvious and unremarkable that various entities work together on issues and projects, but key to Kunik message is that acknowledging the players and not undervaluing the roles each party plays is vital to successful collaborations and solid relationships.

One of the most visible and valuable partners working with the city has been Team Punta Gorda, the community group formed after Hurricane Charley that influence virtually every key decision in the city. The group's extended focus to areas north and south of Punta Gorda will be on display during another agenda item. The South County Gateway project is intended to improve the appearance of the county where visitors and residents alike arrive from the south, melding city and county codes covering architecture, landscaping and signage.

The county and private sector leaders in Port Charlotte have been drawing on Team Punta Gorda's example and experience with the new Port Charlotte CRA. A new nonprofit entity patterned after Team Punta Gorda is being formed and county staff and elected officials have pledged to work with them to accomplish the goals set when the CRA was formed earlier this year. The county could also take a cue from the city's work with Team on downtown landscaping as it attempts to improve the appearance of the Interstate 75 interchange at Kings Highway.

There are always issues that arise that can test intergovernmental relationships. A dispute over the Metropolitan Planning Organization is still simmering and we're disappointed it is not on the agenda. Regular face-to-face meetings are critical to resolving such conflicts. It's a shame to squander this too infrequent opportunity to do so. But with an agenda so heavy on partnerships, perhaps the mood will prompt the boards to tackle it.