

VIEWPOINT

Derek Dunn-Rankin — Chairman
David Dunn-Rankin — Publisher
Chris Porter — Editor

Brian Gleason — Editorial page editor
Stephen Baumann — Editorial writer
Howard James — Editorial writer

E-mail letter to letters@sun-herald.com

Page 12 E/N/C

www.sunnewspapers.net

Wednesday, November 3, 2010

OUR VIEW

Team's gift to Port Charlotte is its example

OUR POSITION: *Team Punta Gorda's example should give Port Charlotte organization hope that recovery is around the corner.*

Team Punta Gorda was born in the dark days following Hurricane Charley. In the six years since then, it has achieved near-mythic status as a citizen advocacy group and has been held up by the Federal Emergency Management Agency as a disaster recovery model. From little things like sprucing up a downtown park to big things like paying for a master plan for the city, Team Punta Gorda has been nothing short of a transformative force in the city.

It's natural for a potent group to

look to exercise its muscles beyond its birthplace, so Team Punta Gorda's gaze traveled southward where it began working with Charlotte County and the city on a South County Gateway project. The idea is that people are well into the county before they begin to experience the charms of Punta Gorda, with its walking and biking trail system, welcoming signage, attractive landscaping, etc., so why not extend that brand beyond the city limits.

More recently, Team Punta Gorda made good on its offer to help replicate its citizen advocacy model in Port Charlotte. Nancy Prafke, TPG Executive Director, was among three dozen residents, civic leaders, businesspeople and government staffers who gathered to begin forming a private sector nonprofit to help revitalize Port Charlotte. What Team Punta Gorda's involvement does — in addition to giving organizational guidance and some back-office support while the new group gets organized — is to provide an example that the work of Port Charlotte's new champions can work. Perhaps not immediately or as impressively,

but in ways small and big, lasting and temporary. As she wrote in her column on Saturday, "21 years from now people will be looking back in amazement at what you accomplished."

It will take hard work and commitment. Just look at the Team Punta Gorda organizational chart on its website at www.team-puntagorda.org. Sixteen committees work on everything from overall administration to specific Team projects such as the recently opened Artists' Atelier in Herald Court Centre. Fundraising is a year-round endeavor, involving grant writing, a golf tournament and a brick paver project, among others. Team Punta Gorda is people working, not just talking.

Don't think Team Punta Gorda is successful in a vacuum. It works because it works within the political system, not against it. It tries to get the most out of resources and assets the city controls, not cite parks and public amenities as examples of government waste. Community pride is the unsung ingredient in TPG's recipe. For the idea to work in

Port Charlotte, voices of pride must drown out those that have hounded the County Commission into cutting park, library, maintenance and code enforcement spending to the bone. But TPG volunteers also realize that government can't do everything. An urban garden planted by volunteers is more than just an example of civic pride, it is a living, breathing partnership that has to be nurtured by both sides to survive.

In the months after Hurricane Charley, when business owners didn't know when the next customer would come through the door and residents did daily battle with insurers and contractors, despair easily could have prevailed. FEMA officials tell residents and leaders of devastated communities to expect recovery to take decades. In Punta Gorda, it took less than five years for nearly every sign of the storm to disappear. For Port Charlotte, the slow slide into blight took decades. But the best gift Team Punta Gorda can give to its sister organization across the Peace River is the promise that recovery is closer than we have any right to believe.