

Here's a great New Year's resolution

It's that time of the year when we make New Year's resolutions, a personal planning process that helps us focus on where we want to go and how we want to get there. In community planning we also set goals and follow a similar planning process. It's a practice that Team Punta Gorda values and also engages in as we move into a new year. Let me share some insight about why it's important to us.

The University of North Carolina's "Small Towns, Big Ideas: Case Studies in Small Town Community Economic Development" examined small towns across the country. One of their lessons learned is that in small towns, community development is economic development. Capacity-building and other strategies typically



Nancy Prafke

associated with community development are analogous with actions designed to produce economic outcomes. In Charlotte County and Punta Gorda, we are definitely beginning to see economic paybacks from years of revitalizing our community, thrust into high gear just over seven years ago.

Another lesson learned is that small towns with the most dramatic outcomes tend to be proactive and future-oriented; they embrace change and assume risk. In most cases the studied towns hit bottom and had no place to go but

up. This was the catalyst that forced change. Are you thinking that we've been there and done that? We're finding the taste of success is too sweet to abandon the process and slide backward.

The study cited that successful development strategies are also guided by a broadly held local vision. Inclusiveness of the planning and visioning process is critically important, including representatives from government, community organizations, for-profit and non-profit interests, businesses, and average citizens. In small towns, people are always the most important resource and communities with limited resources cannot afford to exclude anyone from planning or development efforts. While Charlotte County and Punta Gorda weren't mentioned in

this study, it was as if the authors were writing about us.

Not to be overlooked, special attention needs to be paid toward integrating newcomers into the community. We've learned too that newcomers, including young leaders, bring a fresh perspective and new energy to local challenges. Statistics show that potentially one third of our population by now will have only recently moved here to enjoy our community and have little idea of what we once were before this transformation began. Engaging newcomers into the community development process is crucial to maintain momentum.

Team Punta Gorda is a non-profit, community organization that has been extremely active in this process since Hurricane Charley. Just as the study

indicates, people are Team's greatest asset. We too have long-time volunteers and at the same time are continuously welcoming new volunteers of all ages.

Team's volunteers made significant contributions from launching Florida's first and only free bicycle loaner program, an Artisan's Atelier, and Charlotte County's first community garden. They also share their talents and visions in architecture, beautification, bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly initiatives, communications, community and economic development, education, finance, fundraising, government relations, grants, maritime and waterfront, operations including staffing the office, planning, and special events.

Make a New Year's resolution now to join the process and get engaged! Come to Team

Punta Gorda's 2012 Meet and Greet on Thursday, January 12, 2012 at FGCU in Herald Court Centre from 5-8 p.m. It's an opportunity to meet board and leadership Team members and committee chairs. Special (and brief) presentations showcasing volunteer opportunities will be made at 5:30 and 7 p.m. Refreshments will also be served. All are welcome!

For more information, contact Team Punta Gorda at team@teampuntagorda.org or 941-637-TEAM. We're also on Facebook. Keep tabs on Team Punta Gorda through Team Talk, our monthly e-newsletter, by signing up on our website at www.Teampuntagorda.org.

Nancy Prafke is CEO of Team Punta Gorda. Readers may reach her at team@teampuntagorda.org.