

Punta Gorda parks a bargain



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"The property was purchased with monies from the Florida Communities Trust as preservation land," Austin said. "The amenities were put in with a recreation grant from the state of Florida. It's a freebie except for maintenance."

And amenities are abundant. There is a well-marked, mile-long trail with two loops and illustrated signs pointing out wildlife and plants you may see while there. The trail, some of it boardwalk, takes walkers to a PGI saltwater canal with a fishing pier, as well as tidal and freshwater views.

Downtown, two little park jewels are tucked away among the buildings and restaurants. Kudos go to TEAM Punta Gorda for the way Hector House Plaza

and Herald Court Park look beautiful landscaping and brick pavers paid for by TEAM with labor provided by members of its Landscape Committee.

Since everything is so packed together downtown, I know many people think Hector House Plaza, at the corner of Taylor Street and Olympia Avenue, belongs to the adjoining Wotitzky, Wotitzky Ross & McKillop law firm. Not so; it sits on city property local history buffs consider hallowed ground - the site of the house owned by Tom Hector, where the city of Punta was named and incorporated in 1887. Take time to read the marker to find out more interesting historical tidbits.

It has a nice patch of grass in the middle, benches and two chess tables for those so inclined. As the photo on this page illustrates, the plaza offers a great view of the restored courthouse.

more than 50 yards away; Herald Court Center Park is the most lushly landscaped piece of city property, thanks to TEAM, which just finished adding additional plantings in this pocket park just across Herald Court from the parking garage.

It may also be the most anonymous, largely because it abuts the now-closed Thrtle Gub and looks as if it is on private property. That may not be a problem much longer, since the city has already installed a column on which a plaque like the one at Pittman Park Extension will be placed.

This little park is a great place to sit, drink coffee and chat with friends. The large fountain offers ambience and the mature trees shade. It's an oasis of quiet and much under utilized.

Perhaps equally unknown is Baker Park of the grounds of the Baker Pre-K Center at Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and East Charlotte Avenue. It's only unknown to those of us who don't work or go to school at Baker. It's one amenity - pairs of benches - are heavily used by the school.

"The six-seater strollers pull into the seating areas for snack time," Austin said. "Six of the parks I've written about in the Herald - Hector House Plaza, Herald Court, Sculpture Garden, Unear, Pittman Extension and Baker - have been built since Hurricane Charley. You might wonder why the city is adding so many parks that need to be maintained in a time of budget shortages. The answer is easy - TEAM Punta Gorda and the skillful use of limited resources on the city's part.

"TEAM Punta Gorda has invested time, money and resources and really helped us improve our parks," Justin said. As for paying for all these

amenities, the city has a plan to keep costs down.

"We do all we can to enhance our amenities through various funding sources, federal and state, as well as private developers in the case of Pittman and Sculpture Garden parks," he said. "The City Success is acquiring more money.

And the City has been working to get more tax payers to help pay for it. "It's an anti-tax task," said SAJ ISA.

"Part of the strategy is to keep costs in mind when buying landscape materials and equipment," he said. "For example, we use native plants that don't need much care. We're trying to be as cost conscious as possible."

Proof of this is in the budget numbers. Only 11 or 12 employees take care of all our parks and maintenance of the plantings in medians and rights of way. The budget, \$1.5 million in 2008, is down to \$1.2 million in 2010.

Remember, they are your parks. Use them and rent them by calling Usa Harmon at 941-575-3314. Enjoy.

The Nature Park fishing pier has a view and is a good place for anglers to escape the wind that can plague more exposed piers.



Landscaping, chess tables and a view of the historic courthouse are the main amenities at Hector House Plaza.



Shade, benches and a bubbling fountain make Herald Court Park a perfect place for a quiet chat or a cup of coffee.



Baker Park has winding sidewalks and shady seating areas that are popular during the Baker Pre-K Center's snack time.