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Marina's opening signals post-Charley resurgence

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PUNTA GORDA -- The Laishley Park Municipal Marina buzzed with boats Wednesday as residents scooted off into the Peace River's cool waters.

But there is an even bigger buzz about the marina's long-awaited grand opening, which starts Saturday and ends Sunday.

"A lot of people have been waiting on this for such a long time, and that's what makes it so exciting, that it is finally happening," said Kathleen Dailey, assistant city manager for Punta Gorda.

In fact, people have waited about 16 years for the riverfront marina and the city's only public boat ramp on Peace River.

The grand opening signals the resurgence of the city after Punta Gorda was badly damaged in Hurricane Charley about three years ago.

The soft pink marina building has a bright outside mural of the sea with dolphins and birds under a clear blue sky. It's accented with crisp white posts and handrail.

"It's beautiful," Dailey said. "Some of us have been looking at mooring fields and facilities throughout the state, and I have to say that this is the nicest one we've seen."

The Laishley Park project is being built in two phases. The grand opening this weekend is for the first phase, a \$7.6 million, 7,100-square-foot building with a marina. The old Florida-style building has a ship's store, dockmaster's office, sailors' day room, community room, restrooms and showers.

It includes an 85-slip marina with 68 floating and 17 fixed docks. The park's renovated boat ramp opened in December.



STAFF PHOTOS / DANIELLE RAPPAPORT /

Dockmaster Buzz Lewandowski, left, and Rusty Heaxt, assistant dockmaster, prepare Wednesday for the grand opening of the first phase of the Laishley Park Municipal Marina. It will include an 85-slip marina with 68 floating and 17 fixed docks. The park's renovated boat ramp opened in December.

"Laishley Park typifies what the area offers, given its location," said Rebecca Allen, public relations manager for the Charlotte Harbor and Gulf Islands Visitor's Bureau.

Allen said the marina will be a tourist draw for the city.

People can slip in by boat, stay at a hotel, enjoy restaurants and other amenities without getting into a car, she said.

"It's really something to be excited about," Allen said.

City officials also have been basking in the news that developers are moving forward with two major mixed-use projects.

Harbor Inn & Yacht Club has handed the city an easement for a public riverwalk that the developer promises to build to connect his development and Laishley Park.

Also, the developer of City Marketplace is moving forward with his plans after settling a lawsuit with Bealls Outlet.

In addition, the city has contracts for Phase Two of the Laishley Park project for a two-story building with a restaurant on the second floor and retail space below. The restaurant will be called Laishley Crab Shack or Laishley Crab House.

The second phase is expected to cost \$4.3 million and will be designed and built by Marina Park, LLC, a partnership of five local businessmen, including the son of the man whose name is on the city park.

Two open markets under pavilions are planned along with a water fountain where children can play.

Developers hope to break ground on the project at the end of the year and complete it in 18 to 23 months.

Marina Park also is managing the Laishley Park Municipal Marina and store and already has a dockmaster on site.

Randy Brodersen, Punta Gorda's project manager for the marina, said people are charged up about the new park.

"It's a big thing for the city of Punta Gorda," Brodersen said.

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