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Concrete, mortar painting bright year in Punta Gorda



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Editor's note: As 2008 draws to a close, the Sun is recapping the top stories of the year.

PUNTA GORDA -- The mythic phoenix was said to rise up from its ashes.

Punta Gorda is not rising up from ashes, but the signs are now appearing that it's rising from the rubble left by Hurricane Charley in 2004.

Hurricane Donna damaged many, if not most, of Punta Gorda's structures in 1960, but it did not have the same devastating impacts to the city as Charley did in 2004.

This past year proved the most fruitful sign of recovery yet for the city.

Between the construction and opening in 2008 of Charlotte Harbor Event & Conference Center and Wyvern Hotel, the opening of the city's Laishley Marina, the mixed-use Sunloft building and the Four Points by Sheraton now under construction, Punta Gorda is seeing a new emerging downtown.

"It's not just a new look," said Vernon Peeples, a Punta Gorda historian and an eight-decade resident of the city. "It's a new emphasis."

Peeples said he's pleased by what he sees already there, such as the restaurants and the city's work on the extension of a public Harborwalk that will allow residents and visitors to stroll along the downtown waterfront.

"It will make a better quality of life," Peeples said.

City Manager Howard Kunik said people can expect more in the upcoming year, such as improvements to Laishley Park which will include an interactive fountain, new open-air pavilions and the privately owned Laishley Crab House restaurant. He also said the city will be working on its linear park for bicyclists and pedestrians throughout the city.

Bruce Laishley, Chris Evans, Evans's father, Ron, and their other partners hope to be serving customers at the Crab House in 10 months or sooner. Both Laishley and Evans grew up in Punta Gorda, but Laishley said the city has never realized its true value. Laishley believes its value will now shine through.

City Councilman Charles Wallace, who owns the River City Grill restaurant in downtown Punta Gorda, said, "There's already a lot of excitement. There's so much going on in Punta Gorda."

Besides his existing restaurant, Wallace plans to open a 250-seat Florida-style restaurant at the Sunloft Center at the corner of Taylor Street and West Marion Avenue.

Before he became a council member, Councilman Harvey Goldberg was an original member of Team Punta Gorda. In the wake of Hurricane Charley, Team Punta Gorda emerged as a grassroots effort to plan the rebuilding of city. The group raised more than \$200,000 and hired Jaime Correa, noted urban planner and University of Miami Knight Professor of Community Building, and his team of planners to come up with the Team Punta Gorda Citizens Master Plan.

The team's plan, Goldberg said, reflected and reaffirmed many of the new urbanism strategies found in the city's redevelopment planning efforts.

"I'm thrilled to see what is being built and what's on the table to be constructed is very consistent with the Citizens Master Plan," Goldberg said. "It's certainly consistent with our (land-use regulations)."

Punta Gorda Chamber of Commerce President John Wright said the city is already seeing the streets filling up with out-of-state plates.

Joe Suriol, developer of the Four Points by Sheraton, may have one of the most positive signs of what the upcoming year. Suriol expects to see his hotel accepting guests in late April or early May.

Sheridan representatives recently visited Punta Gorda to see the progress being made on what will be a 106-room hotel. They liked what they saw with the new county conference center, Wyvern and other new commercial development in Punta Gorda's downtown.

"The lenders feel positive," Suriol said about all that's happening in the city, and in the recent economic climate, that's no small feat.

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