

Five years after Charley: Punta Gorda emerges as a brand-new city

By CHRISTY ARNOLD, Charlotte Sun Editor

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PUNTA GORDA — The out-of-place, art-deco-ish Punta Gorda Mall sign stood out like a teen wearing clothes that were cool 50 years earlier.

That Punta Gorda is gone.

With help from Hurricane Charley and an emerging group of city and civic leaders, Punta Gorda is cool again — and not just for a small group of retirees.

“My gosh, the horizon is fantastic,” said Bob Carpenter, formerly the executive director of the now-defunct Punta Gorda Business Alliance.

There’s the Sunloft Center, bordered by Marion Avenue, Sullivan and Taylor streets. Jack’s Restaurant anchors part of the first floor, at the corner of Taylor and Sullivan.

Behind it, closer to Olympia Avenue, is the rebuilt Wotitzky Law Firm — which sits across Taylor Street from the restored historic Charlotte County Courthouse.

The old courthouse had been an eyesore and sore spot for many. Charley came to town and well, frankly, the storm didn’t inflict much more damage.

In the hot August days following Charley, then-Gov. Jeb Bush’s aides were driving around town and stared open-mouthed at the old, battered courthouse. They uttered quiet, “ohs,” after being told the courthouse looked that bad before Charley.

Flash-forward to Feb. 29, 2008, when locals celebrated the reopening of the Charlotte County Courthouse after its \$5.6 million renovations. The courthouse now houses the Supervisor of Elections office.

Next to the courthouse, hugging the corner of U.S. 41 South and Olympia Avenue, is another new gem for the city. Normally, a parking garage wouldn’t generate much excitement, but this is an attractive one with commercial space available on the ground floor.

Continue south on U.S. 41 and check out the Wyvern Hotel and Four Points by Sheraton — two, brand-new, upscale hotels overlooking Charlotte Harbor. The Wyvern offers spectacular views of the city from its roof, where there’s a bar/lounge and a pool.

Near the Wyvern, Laishley Park has taken on a whole new look with dancing fountains, the new marina and Laishley Crab House, which is expected to hold its grand opening

Aug. 15.

"I had not been back there in years," Carpenter said of Laishley Park. "I was so pleased to see what has happened in Laishley Park ... It gave me chills to see where we've come."

In the corner of Laishley Park, overlooking the water, there's a statue by Peggy Lee McTeague, dedicated to the spirit of the storm's survivors.

"The Spirit of Punta Gorda," includes one palm tree bending over in the mighty winds and another standing tall. It includes a sundial and black mosaic tile, making a shadow indicating the time the storm's fiercest winds swept through the city.

"She started out as a representative of Charley and the people," McTeague said as she put the final pieces together in the park. "She's come to represent a lot more to those of us working on her."

Close to 70 projects have been completed in Punta Gorda since Charley.

"I look at Punta Gorda as a place really taking off," said former Mayor Rufus Lazzell. "It's got all the ingredients people are looking for."

Many can be viewed on a free tour of the city's rebuilding efforts during the Punta Gorda Xtreme Makeover Celebration on Aug. 15 in Laishley Park. Bands, food, drinks, fun and fireworks will be offered at the park, beginning at 1 p.m.

The celebration is less about Charley and more about the incredible progress made by its leaders and residents.

The Punta Gorda area had previously earned accolades such as being one of the best places to live in America.

"We're ripe for that again," Carpenter said.

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