

Hurricane Charley a catalyst for rebuilding Punta Gorda

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The mixed-use Sunloft Center in Punta Gorda replaced a glass-faced office building that was ravaged by Hurricane Charley 10 years ago. Architect Bill Pantsari designed the building using the New Urbanist design principles of the Citizens Master Plan championed by TEAM Punta Gorda. (Staff photo / Harold Bubil)

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PUNTA GORDA -- About half of Punta Gorda's residents were not around for Hurricane Charley.

So there's a considerable percentage of the population who know little of the devastation of Aug. 13, 2004, or the quaint city that existed before that unlucky Friday.

They don't remember the storm's 150-mph winds or the destruction that nearly leveled Charlotte County.

For the very new, the community's informal 10-year anniversary observance of Charley today is a chance to learn how the new landmarks came to be.

"Charley was a catalyst for rebuilding Punta Gorda," said Vernon Peeples, an 80-year city resident, historian and former state legislator. "And it still has a ways to go."

But for others, this anniversary is a chance to finally put the deadly hurricane to rest.

PHOTO GALLERY: Remembering Hurricane Charley

PHOTO GALLERY: Downtown Punta Gorda, 10 years later

"We've had it with Hurricane Charley. We're putting him to bed after this year," said Wayne Sallade, Charlotte County's emergency manager for 27 years.

But every time Charlotte County residents stroll through Fishermen's Village, or stop for a drink at the curbside bar at Jack's on Marion in the Sunloft Center, or take in a show at the Charlotte Event & Conference Center, or attend

the “festival of the week” at Laisley Park, or even have blood drawn at Bayfront Health Punta Gorda’s new medical office building, they are celebrating. They’re celebrating the impressive recovery this city of 17,500 has made since the fast-moving, Category 4 hurricane devastated their community.

Several times since then, news organizations have looked in on Charlotte to recall Charley and measure the recovery.

On this 10th anniversary, Punta Gordans are ready to toast their achievements one more time — starting at 11 a.m. at a new waterfront restaurant aptly named Hurricane Charley’s.

“Even the Weather Channel called to talk about sending (Jim) Cantore down,” Sallade said.

What Cantore will see is a city that not only survived Charley, it thrived.

Noting that the Federal Emergency Management Agency is now stressing disaster resiliency in community design, Sallade said: “You want a poster child for resiliency? Punta Gorda is it.

“You can’t show me a city that was basically wiped out by a hurricane that has had a better resilience than Punta Gorda.”

'New Code City'

The storm carved huge swaths of destruction in Punta Gorda, Port Charlotte, Charlotte Harbor and Harbour Heights.

But in Punta Gorda, the county seat and Charlotte’s sole incorporated city, Charley also marked the beginning of “urban renewal by disaster,” says Sallade, who has been nicknamed “Hurricane Wayne” and the “Master of Disaster.”

“Charley took down what needed to come down, all the bad stuff, all the dumps,” said Lucy Paolicelli, a city resident since 2000 who lives on West Marion Avenue in the heart of Punta Gorda’s National Register historic district.

Included in that was The Professional Center on West Marion Avenue at Taylor Street, in the heart of town. After Charley’s 45 minutes of abuse, it was a mass of broken windows, with drapes and blinds hanging out and the interior ruined by wind-driven water.

In its place is the Sunloft Center, a mixed-use building that includes restaurants, apartments, office space and a parking garage.

More interior parking is offered at the new Herald Court building, which has mixed uses on the ground floor, including space for artisans and a Subway restaurant — the only franchise restaurant allowed in the central business district.

Cubby's Ice Cream occupies a rebuilt building at Marion Avenue and Cross Street (southbound U.S. 41) that is owned by architect Brian Rommell. His studio is on the second floor, which was nearly ripped off by Charley.



Fishermen's Village, a popular shopping and dining destination on Charlotte Harbor, survived Hurricane Charley's direct hit on Punta Gorda but required major repairs. (Staff photo / Harold Bubil)

After an extended debate over where to put it, the Charlotte Harbor Event & Conference Center replaced the utilitarian old auditorium on that same spot.

The new Bayfront Health medical office building on East Marion, next to the hospital, is, like the other new buildings, built to conform with the new Florida Unified Building Code.

“Hurricane-hardened,” Sallade said of the structures. “This town should have the label ‘New Code City,’ because many of the newer buildings, built to new codes, suffered only cosmetic damage during Charley. That is the difference the new code makes. Those buildings performed remarkably well.”

The city also has two new hotels: the boutique, upscale Wyvern, with its popular rooftop party deck, and, closer to the river, the Four Points by Sheraton, with its enormously popular tiki bar.

Both are within walking distance of downtown and the event center.



The makeover of Punta Gorda is evident at HarborWalk, on the Peace River, which is part of the Punta Gorda Pathways project that was promoted by TEAM Punta Gorda in the aftermath of Hurricane Charley in August 2004. At left is the Charlevoi Condominiums, heavily damaged by the storm. At right is the Charlotte Events and Conference Center, which replaced the aging Civic Center and opened in 2009. (Staff photo / Harold Bubil)

With many major construction projects completed, the historic district is seeing something of a residential construction boom.

The city has invested heavily in linear parks for walkers and bicyclists, so they can circumnavigate downtown, with three miles of pathway along the Peace River.

TEAM Punta Gorda

A major flood-control project this year has torn up Gilchrist Park, West Retta Esplanade and Durrance Street in the historic district.

It is expected to be completed in a few weeks and should add capacity to an antiquated stormwater system and reduce street flooding.

Still to be filled: “the hole.” That is how some people describe the site of the Punta Gorda Mall that was shredded by Charley, right in the middle of town at Marion and U.S. 41 northbound.

A year ago, the idea of Sarasota's Mote Marine Laboratory building an aquarium there was met with great excitement, but the idea is off the rails for now, said Nancy Prafke, a member of the City Council.

"I don't like to see a huge block of land in the center of the city still undeveloped," said Peeples, the 84-year-old former legislator and historian. "That is not very attractive. But it is an extremely valuable piece of property that, developed properly, could be a huge addition to Punta Gorda."

Despite that gap, many think Punta Gorda has already made amazing progress.

A lot of people and groups, including the City Council, county government and Main Street Punta Gorda played a role in that, but the city's rebirth was exactly the goal of a unique volunteer organization that formed after Hurricane Charley.



Punta Gorda's mural program was an initiative of TEAM Punta Gorda in the aftermath of Hurricane Charley 10 years ago. (Staff photo / Harold Bubil)

TEAM Punta Gorda — or "Together Everyone Achieves More" — was formed in the months after the storm.

A group of volunteer citizens realized the City Council had its hands full and decided to tap the talents developed in careers elsewhere that are often found among retirees and others in Florida communities.

"A bunch of, up to that point, unconnected citizens got together and raised about \$50,000 to do a citizens' master plan," said John Wright, president of the Punta Gorda Chamber of Commerce, who had arrived in the city on Aug. 13, 2004. "They invited the well-known urban planner Jaime Correa of Miami and said, 'Help, what can we do to make Punta Gorda into a pedestrian-friendly, walkable waterfront community that generations can enjoy down the line?' And that is what has happened today."

"We have done this by embracing the spirit of the town and the historical ambience of the town, and tried to preserve it," said councilwoman Prafke, former CEO of Team Punta Gorda. "That is a marketable asset. That is what makes us special.

"Long-timers have always felt like this is a special kind of a community with a heart," she said. "Charley really started something and brought about the community creating vision.

"Before then, I don't think that had been the case."



West Marion Avenue in Punta Gorda. Hurricane Charley stopped the clock at 4:27 on the afternoon of Aug. 13, 2004. Some in the city wanted to leave the clock stuck at that moment, but leaders thought a functioning clock was a better indicator of the Punta Gorda's renaissance. (Staff photo / Harold Bubil)

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