

## County working on strategic plan with open eyes

By Hector Flores

County staff have been participating in group brainstorming sessions with colleagues, subject matter experts and citizens in preparation for the County Commission's upcoming strategic focus areas workshop.

The commission's four strategic focus areas are public services, economic and community development, efficient and effective government and infrastructure.

In public services, our aim is to maintain a safe and healthy community by delivering essential services from skilled, professional and dedicated public servants.

In economic and community development, we want to foster a business climate that promotes a diversified, growing economy consistent with sustainable growth management plans, environmental stewardship and enhanced quality of life.

Operating local government in an efficient and effective way, we seek to manage fiscally sound county operations with a culture of transparency, accountability, citizen engagement and innovation.

We build and maintain county infrastructure to meet our evolving needs and enhance our community's appearance, improve public safety and protect our natural resources.

Recognizing the seismic shifts our community is experiencing, it is vital that we consider evolving scenarios that could impact our planning and ability to reach goals set by the board. We've identified four situations we need to take into account in our planning and goal-setting.

The county is experiencing accelerated population growth. In the last decade, Charlotte County grew by 16%. Currently, we have exceeded 200,000 residents and are growing at a rate of more than 25%, which would add 50,000 people by the end of the decade. How does this impact levels of service delivery, facility capacity, housing affordability, labor availability and more?

We've been dealing with high single-digit inflation. What if inflation is not abated and continues to increase for the next two years. How does that affect our budget, capital construction and maintenance costs, contract overruns, employee salaries, etc.?

We have thus far avoided a recession, which is a recurring part of the historical economic cycle. What if we face a national recession in 2023? Will we be insulated from it because of our ongoing growth? Will it slow the influx of new residents from more impacted regions? Will it pose an opportunity to accelerate capital projects as vendor demand softens?

When we began our two-year budget process planning, Hurricane Ian hadn't struck yet. We know from experience recovery from Ian will last at least through the next two years, with some aspects, such as facility replacement, taking even longer. That recovery will occur in the context of the factors discussed above. Are there potential upsides from insurance money flowing through the local economy, generating revenue for the county? How can we mitigate future damage to our facilities? Will growth slow down due to hurricane fears?

We don't know the answers to all these questions, but we have plenty of experience to help us navigate the possibilities. Our County Commission sets strategy with eyes wide open. Challenges and obstacles are identified and acknowledged, not ignored. I look forward to sharing with you the outcome of the strategic focus areas workshop in the coming weeks.

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