

Commission receives sales tax project updates

By Hector Flores

Staff presented updates on 1% local option sales tax projects to the County Commission Tuesday. Charlotte County voters have approved the 1% tax on sales under \$5,000 six times, including by 67% percent of the vote in 2020. The tax has raised nearly \$600 million since it was first approved in 1992.

The first project on the 2020 sales tax list to be completed was Phase 2 of the Family Services Center on Gibraltar Drive in the Parkside area of Port Charlotte. We celebrated with a well-attended ribbon-cutting and open house to thank all involved in the project and the scores of county staff and non-profit partner employees and volunteers who are serving our community in the center.

Staff also reported the final project on the 2014 sales tax Tier 1 list — a multi-use path along a section of Kings Highway — has been completed. In addition, surplus funds from that extension were allocated to the Supervisor of Elections warehouse project, freeing money in the 2020 extension for other projects. Only the Placida West boat ramp expansion on the 2014 Tier 2 list remain to be finished. The boat ramp is in design and permitting and is expected to be completed in the fall of 2026. The Supervisor of Elections facility design is complete and construction is expected to be finished in the spring of 2025.

As work on the design of 2020 projects has progressed, staff reported to the board construction costs have risen dramatically. The budget for the supervisor's facility has been revised from \$4.7 million to \$8.8 million. The budget for the Charlotte County Sheriff's Office administration and 911 dispatch center has risen from \$19 million to \$45 million. The increases may determine whether funding is available for the five proposed projects on the 2020 Tier 2 list.

Other projects underway include the sheriff's District 2 office and training center, which is under construction at the site of the demolished old county jail on Airport Road. Construction is expected to be finished next summer. The county has acquired property for the new Fire & EMS Station 17 and the Station 6 replacement. Property acquisition for the Station 3 replacement will be included in the station design contract.

Three park projects are in design, including G.C. Herring Park, Phase 2 of the William R. Gaines, Jr. Veterans Memorial Park and Port Charlotte Beach Park recreation center and pool. Construction is expected to be completed on the pool in spring of 2025, the recreation center in the summer of 2025, and the other two parks later that fall.

Lastly, design for phases 3-5 of the Edgewater Boulevard project are expected to be complete in September. The project will widen Edgewater to four lanes and connect it directly to State Road 776 at the existing Flamingo Boulevard intersection, expanding capacity for motorists bypassing U.S. 41 to get from the Punta Gorda and Charlotte Harbor areas to S.R. 776.

I want to repeat my appreciation for Charlotte County voters' support of the local option sales tax all these years to enhance our quality of life, invest in our infrastructure and improve public safety. It's not an exaggeration to say the 155 projects funded by the sales tax have been transformative for the county. Funding to construct many of the parks, libraries, sports fields and courts, recreation centers, fire stations, sheriff's offices, courthouses and more would not have been available for many years or would have had to be generated by higher property taxes or hard-to-get state or federal grants.

I assure you as we work to make good on our promise to invest in these projects, we will exercise fiscal restraint and sound oversight to deliver them in the most efficient and effective way possible.

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