

5 Ways Hurricane Charley Changed Punta Gorda

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Devastation is one word that continues to be aligned with **Hurricane Charley** and Charlotte County. And with good reason - the Category 4 storm left the area in ruin, much of it beyond repair. In Punta Gorda, there are still sections of the city waiting to be redeveloped 15 years later - the empty lot in the middle of the downtown district, for example.

But what you often don't hear is how the **hurricane changed** the city for the better. In the aftermath of **Charley**, a volunteer organization called TEAM Punta Gorda formed to focus on the future of the city.

TEAM Punta Gorda CEO Nancy Johnson told the Sun five **ways Hurricane Charley changed** the city, and its community forever:

1. It brought the community together

"The fact that the city was willing to turn the recovery process over to its residents who raised the money to hire a great planning firm amazes me," Johnson said. "This town was re-built based upon citizen input. I believe that led to the emergence of the culture of engagement that you see today. Part of the positive response of the public to all of this change was fear of losing their retirement investments, and the cute little town they had chosen to retire in. For good and for bad, our residents feel entitled to comment on absolutely everything, and that is done in the city."

2. It created a new culture between the city and its people

"Usually government keeps citizens groups at arm's length," Johnson said. "The collaborative process that developed is quite unusual and recognizes the unique strengths of this town. We have a large population of retired professionals with relevant skill sets, and a culture of volunteerism. That, combined with strong leadership at the city level, particularly from the city manager, has been a winning combination (in rebuilding)."

3. It led to FEMA funding that made reconstruction possible

"The aftermath of **Charley** brought with it a huge amount of FEMA funding," Johnson said. "That allowed the city to implement many of the (changes) planned for the public sector. After **Charley**, Laishley Park was born from a trailer park, the old auditorium became the Charlotte Harbor Event and Conference Center and the Harborwalk was built (for) just a few examples."

4. It led to the Citizens Master Plan

Without **Charley**, the Citizens Master Plan would have never been created. This plan was given to the city in 2005, according to Johnson. It established the city's current land development regulations.

"It all made a lot of sense in 2005 and served us well, but it is not 2005 anymore and our LDR's are quite outdated," Johnson said. "My hope is that the city will contract out to get them redone so as not to lose the momentum of the new Citywide Master Plan that is still in the works. We will need developers to be able to see the financial benefit of building many of these new projects, and that cannot happen under our current codes."

5. It led to new life for old structures

"Without minimizing the terrible losses suffered by many, there was also a feeling of 'Thanks, **Charley**,'" Johnson said. "A plaque to that effect is in the Isles Yacht Club grill (to this day). Their molding, repair-needy, outdated building was destroyed and the insurance replacement funds built the beautiful structure you see today. The same happened with the downtown area (Sunloft instead of the ugly professional building that was there). Others still speak of the same phenomena with houses and boats."