



Citizens Partnership for Clean Canals is Underway

On September 19, 2024, two local nonprofit groups, TEAM Punta Gorda and Heal Our Harbor, presented the “Citizens Partnership for Clean Canals” initiative to the Punta Gorda City Council. The purpose of this project is to gather and analyze data about the degree and nature of impairment in the canal system of Punta Gorda, and to develop community solutions.

We have formed a coalition of organizations, government and nonprofits. Among them is a group of scientists led by Dr. Richard Whitman from Heal Our Harbor. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection recently declared our canals impaired. We need data to establish the degree, source and



© Jim Austin | Jimages.com

types of impairment. We’ve recently begun a canal water testing program utilizing TEAM Punta Gorda volunteers. Dr. Whitman will use protocols already in practice in our region for an extended testing program of Punta Gorda waterways.

(Photo above (l. to r.): HOH CFO David Schutz, TEAM CEO Nancy Johnson, scientist Dr. Richard Whitman). Photo by Jim Austin.

We’re working with both the city and county including Charlotte County’s Water Quality Manager, Brandon Moody. We’ve received a \$26,000 grant from the county’s Marine Advisory Committee earmarked for funding for test kits and laboratory fees, as well as \$10,000 in funding from the Punta Gorda Rotary Foundation

The primary goal of the project is to assess the water quality in Punta Gorda’s waterways. This is a citizen science project which will utilize volunteers who will be trained to do water sampling using test kits. A secondary goal is to develop a public education program about the things residents can do to avoid harmful runoff into the canals, to understand the importance of clean water and to identify ways we can help. Volunteers and residents will learn about the ecology of the harbor, critical environmental issues, and local history.

Concepts such as the use of native plants and sustainable landscape solutions will be shared with local groups.

How it all began: The State of Florida Department of Environmental Protection recently declared our canals impaired. We needed data to assess what that means. The Punta Gorda canals are a vast system serving a primarily residential area. To develop community solutions, data is needed to determine the source, extent, and type of impairment to work on developing community solutions. Testing is being done in other areas in Southwest Florida, but none is currently being conducted in Punta Gorda. The cleanliness of these waterways is essential to our economy and local way of life.

TEAM Punta Gorda convened a coalition of agencies who deal with water quality issues to compare what they are doing and look at ideas for collaboration. We also began a



relationship with the county's water quality manager, Brandon Moody. Together we are working on local solutions. A key group in this coalition is Heal Our Harbor, a water quality group with several experienced scientists who are interested in monitoring and improving the water in Charlotte Harbor and area canals. In addition to the testing program, there is a training and public education program to accompany it, and a citizen ambassador program that will educate our residents about keeping our canals healthier. MAC is already providing some support to Heal Our Harbor for the Ambassador Program, currently underway.

This sort of long-term project will require comprehensive planning. TEAM will continue to convene the Water Quality Task Force to prepare for the testing program. We will continue to work with "One Charlotte, One Water" to coordinate efforts.

The initial phase of this project will launch in November 2024 and will occur repeatedly over a one-year period. Volunteers at sites must be consistent and use proper sampling. They must recruit, convene and train a small group of volunteers to implement the water sampling project. Sampling protocols must be strictly maintained for data to be valid. These are established protocols that are Department of Environmental Protection approved and being used in other areas.

Results will be forthcoming in 2025. We look forward to sharing that with all concerned.

Nancy Johnson, CEO

