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'Economic development is not Starbucks'

Former Charlotte economic chief gets real with residents at Team PG event

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There has been a lot of talk about future growth and development for Punta Gorda in the past six months. But talk won't get the job done.

"It's wonderful to get everybody together and create a vision," said Nancy Johnson, Team Punta Gorda CEO.

"That's exciting, but there is also a reality check that has to happen, too." Team Punta Gorda, a volunteer organization focused on developing the city's future, held its annual community meeting Tuesday night.

"You all are going to need to realize and come to a resolution on how you're going to move this city forward," said Lucienne Pears, former director of the Charlotte County Economic Development Office.

Pears and Dave Gammon, Charlotte's interim economic development director, presented ideas to focus the community's vision by discussing the impact of economic development on Punta Gorda.

What is economic development?

It's easier to define economic development by stating what it isn't, according to Pears.

"Economic development is not Starbucks," Pears said. "It is not Whole Foods. It's not Publix or the the Ritz Carlton ... that's commercial real estate development. Think of any company that can be profitable and successful that can create jobs anywhere in the world. Those are our targets industries."

Pears, the newly-appointed vice president of economic and business development at Babcock Ranch, and Gammon both pushed the idea of bringing in new business similar to that of Cheney Bros.

(1 Cheney Way), the Punta Gorda Airport or even an Iron Mountain, a company focused on records management.

"The beginnings of economic building blocks really come from who our leadership is," Pears said. "Who are we putting in control of our city ... in control of our future, and what are their philosophies on economic growth and development in continuing to be financially feasible as we move into the future?"

What are the building blocks to economic development?

1. Leadership/Civic development and the role of public policy

"Leadership, civic development, the role of public policy ... this is what (Team Punta Gorda) has been doing for around 13 years and going," Pears said. "Your efforts and volunteers and the things that you're doing for this city are absolutely a critical building block for economic development."

2. Quality of Life/ Workforce Development/ Infrastructure Development

"One of our big wins lately is our Aviation Airframe and Powerplant Mechanics program that will train new airline mechanics right here at Punta Gorda Airport," Gammon said. "That is what we mean when we talk workforce development. We try to get talented people here and then (with that) we will attract new businesses." Through a grant, Charlotte Technical College will provide training for the certification program that will qualify graduates to take exams for a Federal Aviation Administration mechanical license.

3. Existing Business Development/ Entrepreneur Development

"There are a lot of small companies here and that's where all of these big companies come from," Gammon said. "All of these small companies ... we try to work with them as best we can to encourage their growth and try to come up with new ideas every day to try to generate (more industrial- based) activity. We are always out looking in these areas that are affected by growth from companies that might want to come down here."

4. New Business Development

"We're always out looking in areas that (could be affected by) new business development," Gammon said.

"It comes from a lot of different regions.

Sometimes it's solicited events, sometimes they call us and things just happen. We brought in a boat manufacturer from Canada that just happened to be driving down Interstate-75 and asked us why our land prices were so expensive in Charlotte County.

That's how it started.

They said, 'We have no interest in being here.

We are going to Lee County or Sarasota" and all it took was a phone call and we have worked them in and hope to have them opening in 2019."

In 2017, Charlotte County commissioners approved the development of 10,000-squarefoot manufacturing and marine testing facility on a 5-acre parcel at Punta Gorda Airport and Commerce Park for Metalcraft Marine and Conner Industries.

"My job is actually tremendously easier than your jobs (as Punta Gorda residents)," Pears said. "I have a blank slate to work with at Babcock Ranch and, fortunately, we have a very strong financial powerhouse behind us.

"(How are you) going to move this city forward so you can be appealing to not only my generation and my 4-year-old's generation, but her kids' generation? How are you going to one of the most vibrant, attractive communities in Southwest Florida and what does that look like and how does that move forward?"