



JOURNEY TO THE FUTURE SCRIPTING THE NEW CITYWIDE MASTER PLAN

A Perspective by Nancy Johnson, TEAM CEO

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As I watch the new Starbucks go up at the Cross Trails Center on Route 41, I'm reminded of what this town looked like in the months following Hurricane Charley. It looks like we got lucky this year, while others in the Florida Panhandle did not. Our downtown looked like many of the images coming out of that area. In the days and months following that disaster, there was little debate about whether or not to develop. Charley took care of that. Rather, the conversation was about what to do with all of those empty spaces. It was about opportunity.

Some write that we should let growth occur naturally, and call for no zoning regulations at all. Others are very concerned about what we allow and what we restrict. The issue is not so much about residential growth, as we are currently 84% built out residentially within the city limits, and that has occurred on its own. The issue is commercial growth. Where do we want it, and what do we want it to look like?

It is important to remember that most of the properties in town that are available for development belong to private owners, not the City. As long as the property owner complies with our regulations, they do not need to consult with anyone on what to build on their property. We do not get a vote on what they plan to do with their property, any more than you get to vote on what kind of house I might build on my residential lot. We now have land development regulations for that purpose. After Charley, TEAM Punta Gorda had a Resource Center to work with developers and help walk them through the city's procedures, but now the City operates something called the Design Studio where developers can meet with Urban Design staff to present their concept.

That brings us to where we are today. The City is planning to rewrite the Citywide Master Plan. They are planning to do it with maximum engagement from the community. To that end, Council has just completed selection of the consulting firm that will manage the process. This time around, an economic development analysis and recommendations for updating our land development regulations are also

part of the process. This is really the right way to go. It's important to understand that the city could rewrite this plan at any time without gathering any citizen input. They have a staff of urban planners, and could just go and develop a plan, and let us know the outcome later. The fact that they have once again chosen to invest in a public engagement process speaks volumes for our current leadership.

As we move forward with this process in the coming months, let's remember what is special about this place called Punta Gorda. The tradition of this kind of citizen-government collaboration is as much a part of our culture as our appearance.

TEAM Punta Gorda is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Nancy Johnson is the CEO of TEAM Punta Gorda. Ideas or questions can be addressed to team@teampuntagorda.org. Or, call 941-637-TEAM (8326). Find a complete schedule of all upcoming activities, as well as more information about TEAM Punta Gorda, membership, or to volunteer, visit our website, www.teampuntagorda.org.