

## Commission presses for progress on Cultural Center

By Hector Flores

During the County Commission's Tuesday capital projects workshop, the board discussed the status of the existing Cultural Center of Charlotte County property and what the county can do to meet unmet needs in the community since the center closed. The unanimous consensus of the board was that the county should begin planning for a new facility immediately and identify funding sources and opportunities, such as grants, on a parallel track.

Commissioners expressed their gratitude for the work undertaken by the Charlotte Community Foundation to create a report identifying programs and services the center provided, the availability of similar offerings in the community in the center's absence and feedback from the public about its expectations.

Damage to the former Cultural Center building was so extensive, it is all but inevitable it will need to be torn down and replaced. The cost of a replacement building will depend on what services and programs will be offered there. In the 20-year capital needs assessment spreadsheet reviewed by the board, there is not even an estimate at this time. Board discussion centered around the potential cost of amenities, such as a theater, vocational training programs, meeting and classroom space, food service capabilities and more. The cost will be in the 10s of million of dollars. How much will depend on what gets built.

The current site also includes the Port Charlotte Public Library, which is still operational after undergoing a recent remodel and hurricane repairs. However, due to the age of the library, it is slated for replacement in Fiscal Year 2027/28 at an estimated cost of \$15 million. Whether the board decides to incorporate the new library into a new cultural center will affect both the timing of its replacement and the overall cost of the new center.

One of the most immediate needs in this whole discussion is input from residents. Commissioners discussed wanting to schedule public input sessions as part of the planning process. We recently held a series of such sessions about the future recreation center at Port Charlotte Beach Park, so we expect there will be substantial interest from the public when we ask for input in the coming months.

The Cultural Center has been an integral part of Port Charlotte since the community was developed beginning in the late 1950s. When the not-for-profit board that operated it dissolved and closed its doors, there has been a void. People want a communal place to visit friends and make news ones. They want a place to learn a new language or new dance steps or how to use fancy features on their phones. Clubs and organizations want a place to hold meetings, conferences, concerts, plays.

The County Commission and my county colleagues have listened to and read input about what to do next. On Tuesday, the board said, let's get going. I'm looking forward to sharing what's next as soon as possible.

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