

## Looking back at an eventful year in Charlotte

By Hector Flores

The approaching new year is an opportunity to reflect on the county's efforts to deliver exceptional service to our community and to preserve and enrich our community's quality of life for those who live, work and play in our paradise.

Those lines are the county's mission and vision, the driving force behind our every decision, policy, service and program. I'm honored to serve with colleagues who embody those words and share the values behind them: committed, accountable, resourceful, energetic and supportive.

2023 was a year of recovery from the effects of hurricanes Ian and Idalia. Our community has made tremendous strides to get back to normal, but there is much work to do. Ian caused more than \$360 million in damage and cleanup costs. With nearly 90,000 streets signs damaged or destroyed, we're still battling supply chain bottlenecks to restore all of them.

Four major facilities, the Mid-County Regional Library, the East Port Environmental Campus and the Ann and Chuck Dever and Tringali recreation centers are still closed. Earlier this year, the County Commission decided to repair the library, which had to be gutted due to water intrusion. We're waiting for certification of elevation requirements and additional mechanical evaluation before presenting those to the board for direction on tearing down or rebuilding East Port. Dever and Tringali recreation centers are undergoing repairs.

Work continues on the Charlotte Sports Park and we're looking forward to the first pitch of the Tampa Bay Rays' spring training season in February.

As we continue our recovery, one word is guiding decision-making: resiliency. We will rebuild stronger to limit damage from future storms, expand the number of staff trained to serve in pre-, during and post-hurricane roles and improve our ability to reach residents with critical emergency messaging.

In January, the commission will be presented with a report from a consultant and determine the future of the former Cultural Center of Charlotte County facility. Staff held four public input meetings and conducted a survey that received more than 2,982 responses. That input will be vital to making decisions about programs and services the county provides and what will be done on the former Cultural Center site.

The county made progress this year on expanding affordable housing, one of the board's strategic focus areas. Jacaranda Place opened on Loveland Boulevard. In October, Palladium Investment Group submitted preliminary plans for its 600-unit apartment development on Bachmann Boulevard. Rental rates negotiated in the sale of the property will have varying levels of affordability based on our area's median income.

Phase 2 of the \$10.9 million, 18,500-sq.-ft. Family Services Center on Gibraltar Avenue has been completed. The facility, which was funded by the 2020 voter-approved 1% local option sales tax, will house youth services programs, non-profit community partners and Human Services Department staff. A ribbon-cutting and open house is scheduled for 4 p.m., Feb. 15.

We're continuing to expand ways the public can access county meetings and original programming by launching a YouTube livestream of CC-TV, Charlotte County's local government television at [www.YouTube.com/CCTVcharlottecountyFL](http://www.YouTube.com/CCTVcharlottecountyFL). In January, CC-TV also will be available via a streaming app on smart TVs. We learned from numerous public outreach events that many residents no longer subscribe to cable television and could only access CC-TV on their phones or computers. The streaming service will enable people to watch CC-TV just like they watch Netflix, Prime, AppleTV and other streaming services.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to wish everyone a safe and happy holiday season. Enjoy the company of family and friends and reflect on how fortunate we are to live in such a wonderful place.

*Readers may reach County Administrator's Hector Flores at [Hector.Flores@CharlotteCountyFL.gov](mailto:Hector.Flores@CharlotteCountyFL.gov).*