



POLICY STATEMENT

CHARLOTTE ASSEMBLY 2001

August 16-18, 2001

**Sponsored by
The Charlotte County Board of County Commissioners**

**Planned by
The Charlotte Assembly 2001 Steering Committee**

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At the close of their discussion, the participants of this assembly reviewed and adopted as a group the following statement. The statement represents general agreement. However, no one was asked to sign it. Furthermore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to every recommendation.

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. With the support of the Charlotte County Board of Commissioners and the County Administration, many active citizens in Charlotte County have been working together for several years to forge a blueprint for the County's future and to put their ideas into action. This report is from the Charlotte Assembly 2001. Earlier Assemblies in 1996 and 1998 laid the foundation for the present discussion. The citizenry is committed to sustained involvement in County politics, planning, and action.
- B. The County's Assembly in 1996 had a major impact on Charlotte's comprehensive planning process, which is required under Florida's system of growth management. Shortly after the 1996 Assembly delivered its recommendations, the County's comprehensive plan was revised to reduce by half the size of the County's urban services area. This will help preserve the area's community character, protect the harbor, and promote compact, contiguous urban development. Also flowing from the Charlotte Assembly '96 were policies to, among other things, address the county's platted lands problem,

attract new businesses, and make growth pay its own way. In addition, the County expanded its communication programs in community outreach, an annual report, speakers bureau and government day at the mall.

- C. The 1998 Assembly brought forth some major new initiatives. The County obtained State dollars to purchase more than 15,000 lots to address the problem of the old General Development Corporation's developments that lacked sewer systems and included numerous uninhabited lots. The County made investments in drainage, mostly in the Three Lakes Area in Greater Port Charlotte, and Oyster Creek/Newgate Waterway in West County, began a \$35 million asphalt overlay program underway, building new regional parks in West County, Mid County and South County; spending \$13 million to provide sidewalks throughout the County, contributing \$750,000 for performing arts at Charlotte High School in Punta Gorda. Charlotte County is working to develop an inter-local agreement between the Airport Authority to jointly fund a common economic development program rather than having two overlapping programs and duplications. In March of 2001, the County and the City opened a joint fire/EMS station in Punta Gorda Isles, reducing emergency response times in a cost-effective manner. The County government has formed partnerships with other agencies, such as One Stop/Career Center and contracted out the Congregate Meal Program. The County government matches the contribution of the YMCA children's youth and family services in its contract with Department of Children and Family Services (old HRS) to provide subsidized child care (on a prorated basis based on income), began a Dial-a-Ride service in 2001 under a contract with a private provider, and supported three separate projects to expand affordable housing options.
- D. The Charlotte Assembly 2001 was held at the Cultural Center of Charlotte County on August 16-18, 2001. More than one hundred and thirty people participated. The Assembly was planned by a Steering Committee of 25 members with diverse backgrounds and interests. The Steering Committee selected participants to reflect many aspects of the community, including

geography, business, government, civic groups, faith-based organizations, non-profits, minorities, retirees, youth, sports, the environment, education, and others. The questions covered at the Assembly, which were developed by the Steering Committee, addressed the participants' vision for the County's future; community growth; government; human services; economic development; and infrastructure. As keynote speaker Ron Thomas, Director of Habitat for Humanity, said, "The commonality among all of you is your passion for this community. Each of you has a gleam in your eye.... You are a room full of 'gleamers.'"

II. VISION

A vision statement was written during the 1996 Assembly and modified at the '98 Assembly to be more in tune with current issues of concern. Assembly participants said they wanted the statement to be updated again and authorized the Assembly 2001 Steering Committee to do so within the next thirty days.

III. Meeting Human Needs: Public, Corporate and Private Responses

- A. Charlotte County should strive to provide all of its residents with accessible social services to include, but not limited to, affordable health care, mental health services, housing, and child care; and it should do so through education and forging partnerships among the State and County governments, the community, and the private sector. Addressing these issues will not only improve the quality of life for Charlotte County residents but will also encourage economic growth and development. However, Charlotte County should strike a balance with the economic reality of the community and the cost of goods that must be purchased.
- B. Health and human services and needs are interrelated. People who experience problems that affect their economic, physical, and mental health (such as loss of employment, illness, lack of child care, and homelessness) are in need of a

safety net. They have difficulty working, their health may suffer, and so on. We recognize that failing to help people early on, while perhaps seen as conserving scarce public resources for the most needy, may actually result in greater community costs. We urge greater financial support for these necessary services from both State and County governments, the community and the private sector. It is the attitude of the public, private and non-profit communities to offer residents a hand up, not a hand out.

- C. There is a tie between economic conditions in Charlotte County and the population's need for health and human services. Charlotte County residents who lack jobs with good wages are often unable to meet their own needs independently. The source of the problem is two-fold and tends to be self-perpetuating: many jobs in the area pay low wages, and yet the limited job skills of the labor force present a barrier to job growth in industries with higher wages. An important role for local governments and the community is to help unemployed persons and low-wage workers as they strive to better their lives and those of their families. They need education and occupational skills training, and low-cost transportation services to get to school, training sites, and places of employment. They would also benefit from incentives to encourage private enterprise to construct child care facilities. Such economic development efforts would decrease the burden on the County government to meet increasing service demands; they would also impact human service needs across the board.

- D. The welfare-to-work initiative in Charlotte County is important for helping people become self-sufficient, but it has some gaps in both programs and outreach:
1. Programmatic Gaps. There appears to be a shortage of qualified people to carry out programs. Some Assembly participants believe that this shortage can be solved by encouraging volunteerism, but others argued that the shortage is in specialty areas that volunteers are unlikely to be able to handle. Another programmatic gap is the absence of a satellite office of “One Stop” in Englewood.
 2. While human services providers have made a good effort to tell people about the various services and support system available to help people move from welfare to work, more needs to be done. In particular, more attention should be placed on communicating to “potential beneficiaries” and “influencers.” More grassroots involvement is needed to reach people in the welfare-to-work program. In addition, we need to reach out to employers, educators, community and civic groups, faith-based organizations, homeowners’ associations, volunteer organizations, etc., and inform them of the various ways they can promote, support or otherwise lend a hand.
- E. The Assembly participants focused on four areas where the County’s human service activities should be enhanced. (These are not listed in any particular order.):
1. Affordable Housing. There are three types of housing needs: emergency, transitional, and affordable housing. There are still many people in the community who live in sub-standard or inadequate, affordable housing; and

a lack of such housing is directly related to other issues such as truancy, unemployment, poverty, an unstable workforce, and homelessness.

Housing is a basic necessity; without affordable housing people are often unable to obtain other basic necessities, such as child care and health care. Although affordable housing will help alleviate some housing concerns, it is not a complete cure. The County government should partner with the community and the private sector to alleviate homelessness and should work to remove roadblocks for organizations that provide housing assistance, thus facilitating quicker construction.

2. Child Care. The participants agree that affordable and quality child care is necessary for children, their families and the community. Presently there is a lack of affordable child care in Charlotte County.
3. Health Care Cost, Coverage and Funding. Many participants feel that adequate care is not available or affordable to those in need. Indeed, Florida Hospital Associates estimates that 21,000 Charlotte County residents, 15% of the County 's population, do not have medical insurance. Regional hospitals provide services to those without insurance and to the indigent population at deficits that cannot be sustained. Part of the problem, the participants noted, is that many small businesses in Charlotte County do not offer health insurance to their employees. Also, participants pointed out that gaps exist in services and in specialized areas of care.
4. Mental Health Care. Increased mental health care is needed in the County; the Charlotte Community Mental Health Services currently cannot provide

services to all who are in need. The need for mental health care will increase, given the closing of the G. Pierce Wood State Treatment Facility in Arcadia and of a private psychiatric hospital in Ft. Myers. In addition, there is a specific recognized need for services that help citizens handle domestic violence and drug use. Without adequate services, we will continue to inappropriately 'criminalize' some of the people addicted to drugs and/or alcohol and those with mental illness.

F. The community is responding to residents needs, but more can be done.

Specific actions were recommended in several areas:

1. Actions Needed in Housing:

- a. Continue to build interest within the affordable housing development community.
- b. Continue information and educational efforts in support of affordable housing and emergency shelters, and reduce or eliminate impact fees for not-for-profit organizations, such as Habitat for Humanity, and builders who construct affordable housing.
- c. County government should subsidize sewer hook-up fees for affordable, transitional and emergency housing.
- d. County government should look for opportunities to retrofit vacant buildings and then make them available as affordable housing
- e. County government should partner with non-profit and other organizations to consider expanding rent subsidies.

- f. County government should partner with non-profit and other organizations to establish a shelter for the homeless.
- g. County government should make available appropriate vacant lots for not-for-profit affordable housing.
- h. Community should expand 'sweat equity' and service in-kind programs.
- i. County government should reassess government regulations that increase the cost of housing.
- j. County government should continue the annual affordable housing fair.

2. Actions Needed in Child Care:

- a. County government should continue to provide funding for subsidized child care.
- b. County government should encourage the construction of affordable housing projects that include provision of child care.
- c. County government should give incentives to private enterprises that can incorporate child care into their plans.
- d. County government should encourage businesses to provide or partner with existing child care facilities or organizations providing quality child care.
- e. County government should encourage new child care providers.
- f. County government should review the licensing requirements for child care providers; these workers need to be sufficiently trained and a thorough background check should be conducted.

- g. Child care should be affordable and should be available during more hours of the day.
- h. Specialized and affordable child care should be available for sick children.

3. Actions Needed in Health Care Cost, Coverage, and Funding:

- a. Organizations should combine their memberships and form partnerships to provide health insurance.
- b. Participation in programs where volunteer physicians and volunteer dentists provide services to those who cannot afford them should be encouraged.

4. Actions Needed in Mental Health:

- a. Expand and seek additional funding for Drug Court and explore establishing a Mental Health Court.
- b. County government should explore the creation of a crisis stabilization unit for children and should expand the adult crisis stabilization unit for intake and assessment for people with substance abuse problems or mental health problems.
- c. The County government should enhance support for non-profits that provide case management procedures for severely mentally ill persons.
- d. Increase law enforcement training so they have a greater understanding of substance abuse and mental illness.

5. General Human Services Recommendations:

- a. Extend the coverage of the resource hotline and provide additional resources to meet the demand.

- b. Expand the availability of rapid-response programs to assist those referred with immediate needs.
 - c. Set up a resource directory on the County government's website.
 - d. Redefine grants as "contracts for services".
 - e. Assist agencies with grant writing.
 - f. Revise the County government process for funding non-profit organizations by establishing an advisory review committee.
 - g. Establish a central needs directory (a centralized "wish list") for human service agencies.
 - h. Use a variety of means to reach people, including radio, television (including the local cable access channel), newspapers, electronic kiosks in shopping centers or other high traffic sites.
 - i. Continue the agency fair held at the civic center.
 - j. Businesses and the community should work together to create an "adopt a non-profit agency" program.
- G. Networks to Strengthen Community. Most of us want the same things from our communities. We want them to be safe from violence and illness. We want neighborhoods that are alive and that work well. And we would all like to live in communities with neighbors, friends, and associates who care for us and whom we trust. How do we develop communities like that? A strong sense of community forms when people work together on things that matter to them—such as caring for the sick, educating the young, and protecting the weak.

1. Networks are organizations that form partnerships or alliances with a wide range of organizations to work toward a common goal. These alliances encourage people to get together and make a difference. Because a broad-based partnership would bring people together from all parts of the County and all walks of life, it must have sufficient breadth and influence to be successful.
 - a. Important partners might come from the faith community, civic and community organizations, and the media. People from each of these areas will be able to promote health and human services in important, unique ways. By working together, they can build strong partnerships within the network.
 - b. Support and intermediary organizations can and will help a network build on "core competencies" that are necessary for working on countywide health issues. For example, a university research center might give advice on such topics as issue management, needs assessment, strategic planning, advocacy, leadership development, and evaluation.
 - c. Intermediary organizations can also help assess what the partnerships need and provide them with that support. For example, state and county health departments can assist community groups by developing health data systems that provide county-level data. They and other related support organizations can also offer other information useful for making decisions.

- d. Also important in the countywide network envisioned by the Assembly participants are grant providers, donors, and governmental agencies. Foundations, industries, and governmental agencies can help create the conditions for networks to be successful. Grant providers would be needed to deliver the financial resources for non-profit agencies to do their work. Many groups rely strongly (if not completely) on funding from grant providers or the government to survive. However, this important contribution is only one way in which grant providers and governmental agencies can contribute to a collaborative partnership.
- e. The County government can also foster community work in the

following ways:

- By giving a group some funding, grant providers actually make additional funding more likely, because enhance the recipients' credibility.
- Grant providers can use requests for proposals as a way to bring groups together around a common purpose. In so doing, they can forge ties among different people working toward the same goals.
- Finally, grant providers and governmental agencies can also help make outcomes matter by awarding additional funding if groups attain their objectives.

2. A major focus of the Assembly participants was for Charlotte County government to create a human services coordinating council to promote a network dedicated to addressing the human services of the community.
 - a. Structure. The human services coordinating council could be comprised of community leaders and service providers.
 - b. Scope of Responsibility. The human services coordinating council could, among other things, coordinate human services needs assessments, human services planning, and delivery of services and benefits. It could also advise grant providers on funding decisions, conduct program evaluation and promote human services advocacy, public awareness and outreach.
 - c. Funding Options. At least two funding mechanisms warrant consideration.
 - Explore new funding sources.
 - Reconsider current funding options and the allocation of existing County government funds.

IV. Promoting Quality Education

- A. Of particular interest to the residents of Charlotte County is how to assist the school system in maintaining excellence and in providing lifelong learning opportunities. This issue is critical not only from the perspective of the parents and students but from that of the business community as well. Ensuring that all residents receive quality education, job training and other learning opportunities is central to the County's future economic vitality.

B. The Assembly participants agree that improving student performance in Charlotte County is extremely important, and that it should not be limited to improving test scores or receiving a higher “report card” grade. Though testing can be useful, too much emphasis is being placed on these ratings. There are many other factors affecting student performance that also need to be considered.

1. The first is school readiness. Too many children are entering school without the skills necessary to learn. The County government should strengthen the licensing requirements for child-care providers; these workers need to be sufficiently trained and a thorough background check should be conducted.
2. Improvement efforts should also address attitude, truancy rates, life skills, substance abuse, and parental involvement for current students.
3. The community should get more involved in looking at how capital funds are raised in comparison to operating funds.

C. The community should explore ways to influence factors affecting student performance.

1. The community should create a forum to educate the public on education issues and encourage local involvement.
2. The School Board should not only continue its support of proven educational programs, including vocational training, the mall work/study program, and mentoring initiatives, but should seek to expand them.

3. Businesses should be encouraged to become involved in education by teaching students about various trades and by offering internships or apprenticeships.
 4. The community should facilitate the teachers' ability to teach by increasing teacher pay, limiting class sizes, and providing additional resources to schools
 5. Additional pre-school programs, before and after-school care programs, and student activities outside of school should be developed. The New Operation Cooper Street After School program should serve as a model for other neighborhood after-school programs. The Police Athletic League, Boys' and Girls' Clubs and other youth programs as well as mentoring programs should be initiated or increased.
 6. Participants suggested that the community should pursue joint-use efforts, such as the Performing Arts Center in Punta Gorda or a library adjacent to an elementary school.
- D. All of the options presented require that long-term changes be made. Despite current limitations inherent in the state system, Charlotte County citizens must take an active role in improving its school system. At the state level, it is time to let the Legislature hear from the people. The community should take the initiative to develop a strategy to effect positive changes and shift more control of schools to the local level. Lobbying efforts should be conducted year-round and should include students.

- E. At the local level, more involvement from parents and the entire Charlotte County educational community should be encouraged. To better pinpoint problem areas underlying student performance and to enhance solutions to these problems, an Assembly or survey should be conducted to create a forum for parents, students, and teachers to work together.
- F. The existing year-around school program should be maintained.
- G. Raising taxes for schools is another option that could be considered, and one that might prove viable provided voters were sufficiently informed as to how the money would be spent. Some participants support a sales tax extension to help pay for a new high school. Others do not.

V. Expanding Recreation Opportunities and Parks

- A. There is agreement that the County government Parks department is proceeding in the right direction. Most Assembly participants are satisfied with the improvements that have been made over the past several years. In particular, the beach areas and the County's new and renovated parks are impressive. Some participants suggested the following improvements. (These are not in any particular order.):
 - 1. More boat ramps with parking areas are needed. The County government should charge for parking or charge user fees for access to the boat ramps to help pay for maintaining existing facilities and building new ones. Different rates could be charged for County residents and for non-residents. Tourist development dollars should be used to construct new facilities. Public/private

partnerships could also help offset the costs. The County government should adopt rules and regulations governing boat ramp use and parking in parks and on right-of-ways.

2. Bayshore Park should be developed.
 3. More fishing piers should be added.
 4. Some railroad trestles could be improved into piers.
 5. There are limited camping areas in Charlotte County. There is land on the Myakka River that could be developed for tent camping.
 6. More sports facilities, such as basketball courts, skateboard parks, and swimming pools with evening hours, are needed.
 7. County parks and recreation and school facilities should continue to be used for activities.
 8. The Parks and Recreation Advisory Board occasionally should meet in the evenings.
 9. Funding options to develop and maintain facilities should be explored.
 10. Some do believe the County's Parks and Recreation Department should leave management of natural preservation areas to other entities such as the Charlotte Environmental Center.
- B. It is agreed that some use should be made of the stadium and that a decision should be reached fairly quickly, though there is some diversity of opinion on how the County government should proceed. Some propose that it be converted to a multi-use facility, which could host sporting events and concerts. Such a facility could be supported through tourism and sports. Some participants cautioned

against making a large monetary commitment without first conducting a comparative cost-benefit analysis (including a sports team or multiple users) of maintaining the facility, renovating it, and redirecting its use.

- C. There is general agreement that the County government is adequately meeting the needs of the community. However, more recreational opportunities for youth and more parks that meet the diversity of uses are needed, and the Charlotte County Cultural Center needs to move ahead. To meet current and future needs, the County government should implement its long-range planning strategy. This master planning should include appropriate stakeholders to promote eco-tourism (including the Environmental Lands Acquisition Committee). These stakeholders might include organizations such as private business and non-profit organizations. Such a strategy will help the County government address the changing needs of the community and will allow it to factor future land availability and rising costs into current plans.

VI. Building the Infrastructure (power, communication and transportation) for Strong, Diverse Local Economies

- A. Charlotte County has difficulty keeping its roads, drainage, schools, and other public facilities abreast of population growth. This is largely due to the state's tax structure in combination with the limited high-value commercial and residential development in the County. Participants were asked to evaluate needs and suggest actions in several areas.

B. Roads and Transportation. Participants identified a number of road problems and other transportation issues.

1. Most participants agreed that road improvements should be a priority, for reasons of safety and accessibility. There was general agreement on the roads that are most in need of attention. A number of fatalities have occurred on Burnt Store Road during the past year. Routes that would alleviate traffic on US 41 and SR 776 need to be developed. Problems on Midway, Veterans Boulevard, Winchester south of 776, Edgewater, Piper Road and Aqui Esta need to be addressed. Roads leading to the airport should be improved to attract economic development in that area. The cumulative impacts of lighting should be addressed.
2. In addition to traffic congestion, participants noted that some roads were improperly constructed, lanes were too narrow, and drainage ditches were too close to the sides of the roads.
3. West County's evacuation routes need to be expanded.
4. West County's road network needs to be improved
5. A few participants also noted that the County's transportation problems are not limited to road improvements. Programs such as Dial-a-Ride help alleviate public transportation problems. Public transportation is also an important element in helping new entrants into the labor force reach centers of employment and take advantage of educational and training opportunities.
6. Beyond addressing the specific needs listed above, the County government should formulate a long-term transportation plan with the following elements:

- a. Attention to multiple modes of transportation, including roads, and public transportation.
- b. A strategy for developing alternative routes, including new collectors, for localized and countywide travel.
- c. Prioritize projects based on a cost-benefit analysis approach.
- d. Use new traffic lights and synchronized traffic signals to ease traffic flow problems.
- e. Proceed with new road designs that include sidewalks and pedestrian safety features. Retrofit existing sidewalks to be American Disabilities Act compliant.
- f. Some participants suggested that a referendum for a bond issue to finance unfunded projects should be brought before the voters. Others suggested using gas tax or sales tax revenues as a funding source.
- g. Some suggested that the County government 's impact fee program should be evaluated.
- h. The concept of sustainability should be addressed for all new road network design.

C. Fire/EMS. Fire/Emergency Medical Service (EMS) was also deemed a priority issue.

1. Concerns. Two areas of concern to the participants were response times and funding levels. Many participants stated that response times need to be decreased and that planning for sites and equipment should be directed toward this end. Lack of equipment and station locations lengthen response

times. Some participants also expressed concern about high turnover among Fire/EMS staff.

2. Actions for Fire/EMS Improvements. Two actions were recommended. The County government should explore building a Fire/EMS station to serve northwest Charlotte County and explore ways to reduce emergency response time.

3. The County government must immediately find alternative funding to ensure that Fire/EMS and law enforcement staff salaries are competitive.

D. The Airport. Some participants agreed that the airport and the area surrounding it are integral to the County's economic development plans. The County government should consider extending incentives to include concessions on impact and connection fees. Two actions were suggested. The County government and the airport authority should continue to work together to develop marketing programs to encourage business in the area.

E. Convention Center/Hotel. Assembly participants were asked to consider the feasibility of a public-private partnership to develop a convention/conference center. More than a majority of the participants said that the County government should not pursue the conference center idea any further. However, many participants believed that there was a need for meeting rooms and suggested large vacant buildings in the County might serve that purpose.

F. Water. The participants agreed that the year-round availability of water is a priority, not only for Charlotte County but for the entire region, and that long-term strategic planning must be continued. The participants stated the County

government should support the regional water alliance and work to find alternative solutions, because there is an over-dependence on the Peace River. Many options are available, including desalination, reverse osmosis, aquifer storage and recovery (ASR), home cisterns, and wastewater reuse, but the County government should consider those that are cost-effective, environmentally sound, and provide reliability and availability. The following actions should be considered:

1. County government should pursue alternative water sources such as a regional desalination system.
2. Public education programs should be expanded.
3. Conservation methods should continue to be promoted.
4. More wastewater should be reclaimed for use.
5. Additional aquifer storage reservoirs should be put in place; and
6. The County government 's tiered rates-structure should be modified to increase the costs for high users.
7. Preserve and protect surface waters and surrounding land.

VII. Creating Partnerships for Urban Design and Community Development

The quality of life in Charlotte County depends in part on the community's appearance, which can affect property values, economic conditions, and civic pride. The Assembly participants considered a number of strategies to maintain and enhance the County's image.

- A. Gateways into Charlotte County. Community gateways add aesthetic appeal, create a sense of place, and define a community.

1. There is strong support for improvements along the main traffic corridors in Charlotte County. Businesses should be encouraged to clean up and maintain their property, and existing codes should be enforced proactively. Immediate actions on community improvements include moving the numerous newspaper boxes to centralized locations or bus stops, maintaining canals and palm trees, planting trees along the median on county-owned property, and maintaining public and private property on US 41.
2. Participants support the idea of establishing gateways, and there is general agreement about where they should be. Gateway areas identified are all I-75 interchanges as well as US 41 and SR 776.
3. Charlotte County government should seek an additional gateway along I-75 between Toledo Blade and Kings Highway.
4. In conjunction with expanding Toledo Blade into four lanes, Charlotte County government should partner with the City of Northport to create a gateway into both communities.
5. Some suggested that trees displaced from road projects could be used to beautify other roadways.

B. Design Standards and Codes. Design codes are the tools used to create a visual theme, or themes, for landscaping, signage, and set-backs. These standards would apply to private development as well as to the County government's management of its properties. Architectural requirements may be used.

1. Participants have different opinions about what kinds of design standards should be used and how they should be implemented. Opinions run the gamut from

wanting to keep the streets free of trash, to advocating a wide ranging combination of design standards and architectural controls to promote a special community appearance.

2. One group expressed concern for the plight of small businesses if faced with additional tax burdens and design regulations. Perhaps they could be grandfathered in under existing standards or granted extended time periods for compliance, with the new standards applying when there is a change in use.
 3. Another proposal is that the County government should form a cooperative between the Chamber of Commerce, homeowners, business owners, and neighborhoods to develop a master plan design standards and landscape improvements.
 4. A third view was that the County government should develop a master plan for community design and appearance. The plan should address segment themes and color codes, require underground utilities and storm water retention ponds, restrict future billboards, require lighting, etc. Suggested improvements include promoting the “Old Florida” look, street signs, street lighting, street furniture, creating a sustainable community, adding ‘sweet spots’ of flowers and natural plants, creating greenways, and modeling a design program after Punta Gorda’s design standards.
- C. Neighborhood Planning and Design. Participants agree that strong neighborhoods are important to any community; when there is no collective interest, there is no community pride. Once a neighborhood is defined, it can describe its needs and help shape policy.

1. The first step toward creating defined and established neighborhoods is for the County government to devise neighborhood design plans that would address current and future wants and needs. Neighborhood planning should be incorporated into all aspects of planning, but building and establishing neighborhoods is also the responsibility of the citizens.
2. To improve neighborhoods, participants suggested that:
 - a. Neighborhood plans should include neighborhood parks, buffer zones, and sidewalks.
 - b. Neighborhoods should create a distinct identity; and
 - c. The County government should partner with 21st Century Challenge to strengthen neighborhoods.
 - d. Develop neighborhood commercial nodes.
 - e. Use vacant lots to create new development patterns.
 - f. Consideration should be given to include community design standards in neighborhood plans.
3. Traffic is not perceived to be a primary problem at this time though some participants suggested the use of traffic calming mechanism.
4. Neighborhoods should be elder-ready.

D. Rehabilitating Old Structures: the Courthouse. A large number of the Assembly participants supported restoration of the Old Courthouse, but most felt that tax dollars should not be the sole source of funding. They suggested private/public and private/private partnerships be used to raise money to restore the Courthouse.

E. Future Uses of 'Old Platted Lots'. Charlotte County government has been remarkably successful in securing funds and acquiring platted lots, which, if developed as platted, would strain public services and facilities, pave over water-recharge areas, and create severe challenges for fire rescue and emergency management services. The issue now is what to do with these lots and those that may be added in the future. The Assembly participants had a wide range of opinions on the matter.

1. Some participants suggested that the County government enter into the real estate market to trade lots or sell them to the private sector. By trading lots, or by selling lots and using the revenues to purchase other lots, the County government could pursue a variety of objectives. For example, it could shift new construction away from platted lands that are particularly inappropriate for development, and it could assemble lots and re-plat them using modern planning approaches. In this regard, it was also suggested that the County government could partner with a non-profit corporation to trade lots and re-plat them, or to assist private developers in lot assembly and replatting.
2. Other participants thought that the County government should not be in the real estate business but should instead make some lots available for community purposes. Suggested re-use options included (in no particular order):
 - a. Building community recreational facilities.
 - b. Building Fire/EMS stations.
 - c. Mitigation for road development and improvement or to hold retention ponds.

- d. Green/open space.
- 3. A few participants suggested that the lots be combined and rezoned to one-unit per half acre to reduce density.

VIII. Protecting Our Natural Resources

Rapid population growth has put pressure on the County's water supplies, wildlife, and wildlife habitats and has brought more air and water pollution. The Assembly participants recommended actions in a number of areas to protect the County's natural resources and preserve or enhance the area's ecological character.

- A. Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat. All Assembly participants placed great value on Charlotte County's natural resources, but they had different views about how much weight should be given to the environment when environmental protection conflicts with important human wants or needs.
- 1. Some said that wildlife and wildlife habitat should be sacrificed only under extraordinary circumstances. Others said that environmental considerations should always be balanced against people's needs for jobs, recreation, and transportation.
 - 2. Despite these differences at a philosophical level, the Assembly participants were in general agreement on the following recommendations to preserve important habitat for wildlife:
 - a. Make sure that the County government's own land use activities are environmentally sensitive. This would include establishing County easements for habitat protection and removing 'exotic' species.

- b. Designate environmentally sensitive areas, notify the public of these areas, post notices in these areas, and educate the public who may be harming the environment unintentionally. For example,
- Tell boaters about minimum wakes, the importance of sea grass, and the need to protect of manatees;
 - Inform citizens that seawalls and dock runoff is harming sea beds, which are important as fish hatcheries;
 - Place markers in environmentally sensitive areas
 - Identify zones for electric motor or manual propulsion only;
 - Establish and post boat speed limits; and
 - Install a marked canoe and kayak trail.
- c. Make it easier for individuals and developers to protect the environment. For example,
- Utilize some vacant lots to preserve land in perpetuity;
 - Use mitigation banking;
 - Allow land swaps;
 - Promote eco-tourism;
- d. Conduct studies to increase knowledge about environmental issues and to help set policies.
3. Other suggestions were made that may warrant consideration but were controversial. These included enacting an ordinance to require developers to leave some natural habitat and vegetation on their properties being developed.
4. Restrict the collection of live shells on the beach.

5. Participants agree that the County government should continue to expand efforts to support the Environmental Lands Acquisition Advisory Committee's efforts to identify parcels for future land acquisition and continue with additional land acquisition. Some participants favored the County government contracting out the management of preservation lands to nature-based non-profit organizations such as Charlotte Harbor Environmental Center.

6. The balance between manatees and boaters is a subject of contention. It is agreed that waterways should be shared by various users. However, while concern for manatees is appreciated, some feel the County government has sufficient speed limits on boaters. Others believe more restrictions are needed on water vehicle users and that additional efforts should be made to educate users about the environmental value of manatees and sea grass to our environment.

B. Promoting Partnerships to Prevent Pollution. The Assembly participants voiced concern that phosphate mining may contaminate or otherwise degrade the region's water supply resources. Further, they believe that current rules and regulations that protect water quality are not being properly enforced.

1. Participants agree that this is a very important issue, not only for Charlotte County but for neighboring counties as well. DeSoto and Hardee Counties view phosphate mining as an economic benefit, but Charlotte, Lee, and Sarasota Counties and the Peace River Water Supply Authority share concerns over the potentially disastrous impacts that mining could have on regional water quality and quantity.

2. Charlotte County government, in conjunction with these other entities, has requested that the state and federal governments prepare a cumulative impact study before issuing new mining permits. The participants feel that it is important to stand on principle and back the efforts of the Commission in this undertaking. They support paying the expense of defending Charlotte County's interests.
3. The County government should lobby the Governor to require an area-wide impact study; to set a build-out limit on mines; and strongly insist agencies enforce existing rules and regulations and require compliance with regard to mining; and negotiate with IMC to achieve positive outcomes for the County.

C. Charlotte County's Tree Ordinance. Some participants say the existing tree ordinance should be strengthened by increasing fines and implementing like-kind replacement, especially for commercial violators. They also support a mandate for the preservation of 'heritage' and native trees. Others think that the existing ordinance is balanced and fair, but needs to be enforced aggressively. Also, some participants thought that there should be a recalculation of the tree points allowing a smaller diameter. Three actions were recommended: the tree ordinance should be changed to a habitat ordinance; the County government should establish a nursery to recycle trees removed from roadways; and the biological clause in the ordinance should be eliminated.

IX. Customer Relations in County Government

Some participants agreed that County government staff handles "everyday occurrences" well. Participants also praised County government activities ranging from

the geographic information system to the web page to the speakers' bureau. But it was widely agreed that much more could be done to improve the County government's customer-relations efforts. Participants agreed that the administration should continue the mindset that is responsive to the needs of its customers. Specific suggestions included:

A. Some agreed that increased staffing could improve customer services in the human services, building, and code enforcement departments and the Sheriff's office.

B. Some believed that training and experience are needed in the following areas:

1. The County Commissioners should gain a hands-on education of County government operations. A few participants suggested that the Commissioners spend a day working with non-profits.

2. Staff members should be trained in customer service. Staff members should also be kept up-to-date on new policy changes.

C. The County government has done a good job keeping pace with technology and should continue to do so. More information and services should be available on-line. Specifically, participants mentioned putting capital improvements projects and the County government budget on the web page.

D. Some participants recommended the following actions:

1. The County government should stagger office hours and offer more complete services during lunchtime, which will require cross-training.

2. Expand the human services emergency hotline to a 24-hour a day, 7 days a week service.

3. Publicize the outreach/action center group.

4. Decorate the lobby of the County administration building to make it less “institutional” looking.
5. Continue Government Day at the mall.
6. Put the “Welcome to Charlotte County” directory on the website and form a public/private partnership with the Chamber of Commerce to improve dissemination.
7. Occasionally hold Commission meetings in the evenings so more people can attend.
8. Expand services offered at the Englewood office.
9. Continue to put County government policies in writing and make available to customers upon request.
10. County government should examine staff levels and training and empower staff members to resolve customer service problems.
11. Distribute the Human Service Resource Guide free of charge to all human services agencies, e.g., Sheriff’s office, hospitals, and non-profits.
12. Implement a way to recognize citizens who serve the County.
13. Explore using an ombudsman in the County government for citizen advocacy.
14. Place Emergency Help pocket guide on the website.

X. Priorities and Funding Sources

- A. Human services, public education, infrastructure, urban design, and environmental conservation were rated by participants as high priority areas, though the order of priority varied among the groups. The following items are in no order of priority:

- Human services priorities selected were affordable housing followed by affordable childcare, mental health care, assistance to non-profits, and coordination and oversight of services.
- Infrastructure priorities selected were water resource alternatives, including a regional desalination plant, followed by road improvements, and new fire stations.
- Environmental conservation priorities selected were protection of natural habitats, securing adequate protection for the Peace River through the permitting process for new phosphate mines, and purchasing environmentally sensitive lands.

B. Some participants felt that urban design and community development projects were a lower priority. Some felt that parks and recreation projects were a lower priority because they were being developed well in accordance with the master plan.

- One group did feel that design improvements were a priority, particularly along US 41 and SR 776. Another group selected neighborhood planning as a priority.
- Participants felt that the issue of too many platted lots and their effects on the environment and quality of services needs to be addressed.

C. Participants noted that there are various funding options in use or available for the services discussed. They include property taxes, gas taxes, impact fees, state transfers, grants, user chargers, and others.

XI. Disseminating the Policy Statement—Communications and Outreach

Participants stated that the Steering Committee should continue meeting in order to oversee the implementation of the Assembly recommendations. There was also interest expressed by Assembly participants in receiving progress updates and reconvening to review the progress.