

Guest Opinion

Florida Gulf Coast University President William C. Merwin November 5, 2006

Much has been written during the past week in Charlotte County media accounts about a Florida Gulf Coast University site for a future satellite center in Charlotte County, and I would like to take this opportunity to clear up some inaccuracies and omissions.

Since becoming president of Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) in 1999, I have been repeatedly approached by Charlotte County citizens, business and economic development leaders, and government officials about when FGCU would locate a satellite center in Charlotte County. Community leaders expressed time and time again the importance of access to higher education and the desire for an FGCU presence in their community. My response has been that when student demand and resources are present, we would consider how best in Charlotte County to meet the University's mission of providing access to higher education.

Also, in response to this constant call for an FGCU presence in Charlotte County, three years ago we began offering an FGCU semester schedule of courses there, and we continue to make courses available on the Charlotte County campus of Edison College. It is important to note that for the current semester, there are only 144 FGCU course registrations in Charlotte County – an early step toward, but obviously a long way from, the required student demand for a free-standing FGCU satellite center.

Florida Gulf Coast University has for the past 18 months been in the process of updating our campus master plan for the main campus. Our master plan consultants, when considering campus land available for building and projected student enrollment increases, have noted that the FGCU main campus will be physically built out in approximately 10 years with 20,000 to 25,000 students at that time. Population projections for Southwest Florida indicate that there will be a much greater demand in the region for higher education than can be accommodated on FGCU's campus – and thus we began planning ahead for regional satellite centers, including in Charlotte County. It does not require great vision to see that land availability is becoming increasingly limited, and that land costs are rapidly and steeply escalating. To not plan ahead and secure resources for Southwest Florida's higher education future would be short-sighted and detrimental to generations of students to come.

FGCU's growth estimates are in step with U.S. Census and other projections that show Southwest Florida's growth continuing to outpace that of Florida and the nation. Over the past five years, the region has grown 5.3%, compared to 2.6% for Florida and 1.3% for the nation. Charlotte County growth is projected at 5.3% annually, with an estimated population of more than 317,000 by 2030. The demand for higher education will keep pace, with a statewide enrollment increase of as much as 43% during the next decade. For Charlotte County alone, the 2005 number of 10,673 people who are 18 to 24 years

of age is estimated to grow to 42,691 by 2030, and the number of individuals 25 to 44 years old will grow from 15,870 to 63,481 over this same period.

Our planning process for future FGCU regional satellite centers identified the following areas as logical for FGCU service: Naples, Cape Coral, Charlotte County, and Hendry County, and a regional satellite centers supplement to the FGCU Strategic Plan for 2005-2010 was adopted by the FGCU Board of Trustees. Around this same time, a developer team of Brian Stock of Stock Development and O.J. Buigas of Private Equity Group approached FGCU with a Charlotte satellite center gift proposal of 150 acres, \$5 million to be matched by the state for a first building, and a mechanism by which to generate \$750,000 in annual operating revenue. The FGCU Board of Trustees asked that we consider whether additional options existed in Charlotte County, and I decided that the best way to hear from Charlotte County as to its vision for FGCU and higher education would be to appoint an advisory committee comprised of leading Charlotte County citizens and officials to review options and make a recommendation to me.

The FGCU Charlotte County Site Advisory Committee was created earlier this year, and its members were (1) Charlotte County Sheriff John Davenport; (2) Charlotte Sun Herald Publisher David Dunn-Rankin; (3) Charlotte State Bank Vice President and former President of the Charlotte County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors Maryann Mize; (4) Board of Charlotte County Commissioners Chair Tom Moore; (5) Punta Gorda City Councilman Dr. David Phelen, who served as the Committee's co-chair; (6) Fawcett Memorial Hospital Chief Executive Officer and President of Enterprise Charlotte Board of Directors Tom Rice; (7) Assistant Superintendent of Charlotte County Public Schools Roseann Samson; (8) Sandstar Custom Home Builders Chief Executive Officer and President of the Charlotte County Chamber of Commerce Larry Sandles; (9) FGCU Vice President for Administrative Services and Finance Dr. Joe Shepard, who served as Committee co-chair; (10) Charlotte Herald Tribune Publisher and Vice Chair of the Punta Gorda Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors Kathy Silverberg, and (11) a retired university president and retired Senior Executive Director of FGCU-Charlotte County Dr. Bob Burns, who served as a non-voting, ex-officio member of the Committee.

When I gave the Committee members their charge, I emphasized that there would be at least two boards with authority that would be critical to final approval of any site and funding proposal they might recommend to me, and I noted that these were the Board of Charlotte County Commissioners for comprehensive plan, zoning, and land use permissions as needed, as well as the Florida Board of Governors with its authority to approve branch campuses of the state universities. We were told by County officials that the Charlotte County Comprehensive Plan does not allow for a university anywhere in Charlotte County, so regardless of which site was chosen, the County would need to make changes to permit a university presence.

The Charlotte County leaders serving on the FGCU Charlotte County Site Advisory Committee decided to use an Invitation to Negotiate (ITN) process to receive and evaluate possible gift proposals for funding and a site to support a future FGCU satellite

center. All meetings and activities of the Committee were in keeping with the state's Sunshine Law, including making all meetings open to the public, as well as taking public comment for input and feedback.

Five groups made proposals in response to the Committee's ITN. They were Ansin-Charlotte, Crystal and Associates, Eagle Realty, Hudson Sun-River, and Landmark Solutions. Each was provided the opportunity by the Committee to make oral and written presentations, and all did so. After reviewing the five proposals, the Committee voted to eliminate those submitted by Crystal and Associates, and Landmark Solutions – and gave Ansin-Charlotte the opportunity to clarify terms in its original proposal, and all three remaining groups an opportunity to enhance their original proposals.

At the Committee's final meeting, all 10 voting members of the Committee participated. After consideration of oral and written presentations, the Committee members *unanimously* voted that the Ansin-Charlotte proposal did not meet the minimum requirements of the ITN. Next, the Committee deliberated about the Eagle Realty and Hudson Sun-River proposals, both of which offered very generous amounts of land, building funds, and an annual revenue stream for operations. The Committee members' vote on which of the proposals to recommend to me resulted in 9 votes in favor of the Hudson Sun-River proposal, and 1 abstention for unstated purposes. There were *no* dissenting votes by any Committee members for the Hudson Sun-River proposal as the recommendation for FGCU's Charlotte County satellite center.

The Hudson Sun-River proposal includes 150 acres of buildable land that is at the optimal end of the scale for limited vulnerability to flooding and hurricanes; \$5 million to be matched by the state for construction of a \$10 million, first building on the site; annual operating funds of \$750,000; construction of a wastewater treatment plant to serve the FGCU center; installation of wastewater mains, lift stations and other collection and distribution infrastructure; \$1 million in planning services; inclusion of the satellite center in the project's surface water management system; \$2 million reduction in connection fees for wastewater, reuse and water; affordable housing for students and staff, and finance and construction of initial FGCU buildings if desired. Without including the proposal's affordable housing component, the value of the Hudson Sun-River proposal is estimated at \$70 million.

Based on the FGCU Charlotte County Site Advisory Committee's recommendation of the Hudson Sun-River proposal, I recommended it for adoption to the FGCU Board of Trustees, recognizing that the Board of Charlotte County Commissioners and the Florida Board of Governors have authority for key aspects of approval of the site and also approval of a designation as a branch campus. The FGCU Board of Trustees approved the recommendation and directed me to move forward.

Media accounts during the past week have included statements by individuals expressing a preference for the FGCU satellite center to be located in the Murdock Village project. Neither Stock Development nor Kitson & Partners made Murdock Village proposals for an FGCU satellite center in response to the Invitation to Negotiate

process of the FGCU Charlotte County Site Advisory Committee. However, the earlier Stock Development and Kitson & Partners proposals to the Board of Charlotte County Commissioners to develop Murdock Village each contained elements for an FGCU presence. Although neither proposal contained the minimum amount of land or funding that will be needed to create and operate an FGCU satellite center, there was interest on the part of both FGCU and the respective developers to provide space for a smaller-scale FGCU presence that could be used for offering students targeted coursework, such as education courses, in Murdock Village. This opportunity remains viable as a complement to the Hudson Sun-River site for FGCU's satellite center if the Board of Charlotte County Commissioners and the current Murdock Village developer reach an agreement that includes space for FGCU.

FGCU's goal throughout this process has been to learn what the citizens of Charlotte County envision and want for their community's higher education future. To that end we involved key Charlotte County leaders, who did an excellent job of generating interest that resulted in five very generous offers from the private sector to make an FGCU satellite center in Charlotte County a reality. These Committee members took their responsibilities seriously and spent a great deal of time reviewing proposals, interviewing representatives of the proposals, and considering what would be in the best interests of Charlotte County. We listened – and we adopted their recommendation as a partner for Charlotte County's higher education future.

President Bill Merwin
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