

Punta Gorda

After Hurricane Charley, Florida town on the Gulf gains new look and vitality, enhancing its affordability

By Karen Feldman

A small town tucked unobtrusively between Sarasota and Fort Myers has two prime Florida attractions that have become scarce: miles of waterfront property and affordable real estate.

Punta Gorda — Spanish for “broad point” — sets itself apart in another respect. While solid expanses of high-rise condos, carnival-hued beach boutiques and overcrowded roads mark some of Florida’s coastlines, that’s not the scene at this town. Punta Gorda has only slightly more than 17,000 residents and, along with its waterways, boasts a

historic downtown, which currently is undergoing a renaissance.

On the southwest Florida coast, Punta Gorda had its 15 minutes of fame in August 2004, when Hurricane Charley cut an unexpected and devastating swath through it and surrounding Charlotte County, leaving behind \$3.2 billion in damage.

Almost three years later, there’s concrete evidence — in the form of new concrete block and stucco buildings — that the city plans to make the most of its misfortune. It’s what Wayne Sallade, Charlotte County director for emergency management, calls “urban renewal by disaster.”

“There were things that needed to be replaced, but it wasn’t going to happen,” he says. But then the hurricane gave the city no choice.

Tired old storefronts, downtrodden motels and the aged public auditorium have been torn down. Where one 1970s-era office building covered in black glass once stood, stylish Sunloft Center is on the rise, a four-story, mixed-use building that will hold retail shopping and restaurants on the first floor, offices on the next two and 15 residences on the top floor, some of which will offer prime views of sparkling Charlotte Harbor.

Situated between Sarasota and Fort Myers on Florida’s west coast, Punta Gorda is known for its waterways, including Charlotte Harbor and Peace River.

