

Think big — we've got to reach beyond our borders

Recently I heard a caller on a local talk radio show state that we need to start attracting people from cities farther than North Fort Myers and North Port to our area. I interpret this to mean we should be extending our reach, our appeal to come and see what we have to offer.

Americans for the Arts conducted a study in 2005, Arts & Economic Prosperity III. The findings of this study revealed that nationally 39 percent of arts events attendees come from outside the county in which the event is held. The study also documented that non-local attendees spend more than local attendees. Not only will they purchase artwork, they dine in local restaurants, shop at other businesses, and stay in local hotels.

We are attracting others not only from outside Charlotte County but also out-of-state. The Charlotte County Visitors Bureau tells our story every day. My hunch is it's working and our reach is growing.

At Team Punta Gorda we challenge ourselves to think big. We like to imagine beyond what we think is possible. We enjoy envisioning what we would like for our community and then figure out how to get there. Thinking big helped those who shaped the Citizens' Master Plan 2005. Little would we know the impact that activity would have on our community in four short years.

Thinking big helped Team's Spokes and Trails Committee take a local weekend bicycle ride and in two years turn it into one that would have significant reach. Our recently held Hibiscus Bicycle

Tour increased participation by 40 percent this year over 2008. Let me share some very interesting information with you. Out of the 152 riders who participated: 69 riders or 45 percent were from outside of the Punta Gorda-Port Charlotte area. 46 riders or 30 percent were from 14 Southwest Florida cities other than Punta Gorda/Port Charlotte including 14 riders from Naples. Eighteen riders or 12 percent were from nine cities throughout Florida including Ocala, Orlando, Riverview, Stuart and the St. Petersburg-Tampa area. Five riders were from out-of-state, including two each from Muncy, Penn., and Fayetteville, Ga., and one from McCormick, SC. Riders stayed in local hotels and ate at local restaurants and loved the area.

As we talked to the riders who returned from last year, they specifically commented about the very positive changes in Punta Gorda. They told us as they toured the city they kept repeating to themselves, "This wasn't here last year." These riders also offered many suggestions to help us grow the event into an even greater reach. We're very inspired.

The riders from Naples were also impressed with the citizen effort here to promote active lifestyles and making this a bicycle-friendly community. Some of the Naples riders were from a citizens' group who are promoting bicycle paths in Naples. We also let them know about the Punta Gorda's Five-Year Xtreme Makeover Celebration on Aug. 15. They said for sure they won't miss joining us. For more information, go to www.pgmakeover.com.

Expanding our reach and growing these events wouldn't be possible without the support of many people. Please help me thank our sponsors — Punta Gorda Club, Charlotte Regional Medical Center, GBSD Group at Merrill Lynch, Charlotte State Bank, Farr Law Firm, Gulf Coast Benefit Auctions, Peace River Distributing, City of Punta Gorda, Sky View Café, and Tarpon Coast Computers — for their support; our volunteers for planning and conducting a great event; Bicycle Center for providing on course assistance; and fellow organizers Acme Bicycle Shop and **Charlotte County Health Department** for their leadership.

If you want to join Team Punta Gorda and/or volunteer, call us at 941-637-8326, e-mail us at team@teampuntagorda.org, or visit our website at www.teampuntagorda.org. Your contributions are also welcome.

And please, shop and dine locally. Our entire business community needs and deserves our support.

Nancy Prafke

Prafke is CEO of Team Punta Gorda. Readers may reach her at team@teampuntagorda.org.