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NEWS

Mote Marine eyes adding Punta Gorda center

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Mote Marine Laboratory is eyeing a possible expansion of its tourism offerings with a plan to build an aquarium that could revitalize a hurricane-devastated part of Charlotte County.

If built, the proposed aquarium in downtown Punta Gorda would bring Mote close to its original home on Charlotte Harbor and move the organization even further into the role of a statewide tourism destination.

Mote's internationally renowned research center and aquarium on City Island in Sarasota already attract about 300,000 to 400,000 visitors annually who marvel at the diversity of marine life showcased and rehabilitated there.

The institution also has a living reef exhibit in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center in Key West.

Now, the nonprofit organization is considering construction of an eye-catching, multi-story aquarium on a prominent spot on Tamiami Trail in downtown Punta Gorda.

"It's an exciting idea for us," said Nadine Slimak, Mote director of communications. "We're looking at the potential."

The idea originated not with Mote but with a now 2,000-plus member group that has been trying to revitalize Punta Gorda since Hurricane Charley devastated much of the city in 2004.

Tom Kerr of TEAM Punta Gorda says his city's downtown lacks "a major attraction" — a lure to bring in out-of-towners to shop and dine.

The idea of a Mote aquarium rose out of TEAM Punta Gorda's many discussions about the city's potential.

"This could be a real game-changer for Punta Gorda," Kerr said.

Kerr compares the concept with the Florida Aquarium that anchors Tampa's Channelside district of shops and restaurants.

Proponents want the potential Mote Aquarium architecture to have "a wow factor," Kerr said. They foresee a three- or four-story, multi-functional attraction with a view of nearby Charlotte Harbor, a restaurant and possibly a rooftop bar.

The aquarium also would have a strong educational and research component for Mote, a major participant in the Charlotte Harbor Estuary Program.

If it pursues the idea, Mote officials would have to decide how the aquarium would differ from the experience it already offers its Sarasota visitors, Slimak said.

"It could focus on the habitats of Charlotte Harbor" and estuaries, "where the river meets the sea," she said.

The aquarium would strengthen Mote's already deep connection with Charlotte County. The research organization originated there in 1959 as the Cape Haze Marine Laboratory. It maintains a Charlotte Harbor Field Station on Pine Island, which is the base for its ongoing studies of snook and tarpon populations.

Mote is not ready to make any guarantees about an aquarium in Punta Gorda.

"It's really early in the process," Slimak cautioned. "There are no firm plans in place."

The nonprofit organization's next step is to conduct a feasibility study to determine the cost to build and operate the aquarium and whether it would draw enough attendance and donors to support itself, Slimak said.

Kerr said TEAM Punta Gorda is trying to assist in that effort. It has already collected 1,000 signatures of people who say they would support an aquarium.

"I'd like to see us get about 5,000," Kerr said.

Petitions are available at roughly 50 businesses in the city and online at TeamPuntaGorda.org.

Another factor that could favor the project is availability of a prime site to build on, Kerr said.

Since Hurricane Charley devastated the Punta Gorda Mall, the seven-acre site on Tamiami Trail just steps from Charlotte Harbor has remained vacant.

Plans for a development there called City Marketplace fell apart and a bank foreclosed on the property.

Florida Premiere Contractors, a group of local investors that includes developer Bruce Laishley, recently acquired the land.

They hope Mote will consider using about 1.5 acres for the aquarium, said Rob Humpel, spokesman for Florida Premiere Contractors.

"Downtown Punta Gorda does not have a big draw," Humpel said. "Mote would become that draw."

With a Mote aquarium there, retail, dining or other possibilities might arise for the remainder of the site, Humpel said. "The sky's the limit."

TEAM Punta Gorda is anxious to help Mote and Florida Premiere Contractors with any and all details so that the aquarium becomes a successful reality, Kerr said.

"Things are coming along at a nice pace," Kerr said. "We're pretty optimistic."

The grass-roots group TEAM Punta Gorda is asking residents to sign a petition showing their support for a possible Mote Marine aquarium in downtown Punta Gorda. The petition is available at roughly 50 businesses in the city and online at teampuntagorda.org.

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