

# Mote could bring science ed, aquarium to Charlotte

June 21, 2012

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

[ewilliams@floridaweekly.com](mailto:ewilliams@floridaweekly.com)

There is “potential,” not certainty, that a giant aquarium and research facility could be built in downtown Punta Gorda, stress those involved. But so far signs point to yes.

“We’re still very, very early in this process,” said Dan Bebak, vice president of Mote Marine Aquarium and Special Projects.

The potential that Sarasota-based Mote Marine Laboratories will come to town was enough for a private developer, Bruce Laishley, and his partners to buy 7.5 acres in the downtown area a few months ago.

“(Mote) inspired an interest in our side to acquire the property,” said Rob Humpel of Florida Premier Contractors, who works closely with Mr. Laishley and company.

Mote’s aquarium on City Island in Sarasota draws 300,000 or 400,000 people every year. Earlier reports said a planned Punta Gorda concept included a four-story, 60,000-square-foot facility.

And Mote plans to start its array of education programs in the county as early as this fall. That and the possible aquarium here hinge on fundraising efforts Mote is involved in now.

“If that all falls into place, we’re looking at hiring a couple of full-time educators to be based in Charlotte County,” Mr. Bebak said.

They’ve already been in talks with Charlotte County Public Schools. Mote could be a part of the school district’s STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) laboratories, said the school system’s spokesperson, Mike Riley.

“This would be an opportunity for the kids with (an interest in) marine biology,” he said. “(Mote’s) reputation is stellar and in Sarasota they’re huge with the schools, and that’s what we hope to model after.”

Mote, a nonprofit dedicated to marine research and conservation, supports a lecture series, summer camps, internships and other programs in Sarasota. For instance, for Science Café, Mote partners with a local restaurant for an evening of roundtable discussion between a scientist and the community.

That could be coming relatively soon. But building a brick-and-mortar aquarium and research facility on **the land Mr. Laishley and partners bought downtown** is still years away, Mr. Bebak said.

**That land is comprised of 7.5 acres of cracked parking lot and empty space, the old City Marketplace, which Hurricane Charley wiped out eight years ago. Mote's potential development would only take up about an acre, but a crucial acre.**

The facility would potentially attract tenants for the rest of the property, which Mr. Humpel said could eventually come alive as a downtown hot spot.

“We kind of envision the rest of the property developing into a mixed-use downtown type of facility: shops, restaurants, possibly a hotel — something of that type,” he said.

The plans are only conceptual at this point, he noted, and hinge on a major draw like Mote. It's too early to define the size, cost or number of visitors an aquarium and research center in Punta Gorda would draw, said Mote VP Mr. Bebak.

“If there was going to be a physical education aquarium facility it would be in the north east corner of that property,” he said. “There's a lot of planning and programming and fundraising (to do).”

Mote has also spoken with architects about the project and is working on a business plan for the aquarium and research facility. Mote has a long history in Charlotte County.

They began in Charlotte in 1955 before moving to Sarasota, and established the Charlotte Harbor National Estuary program in 1995. They've had a facility in Sarasota since 1978.

“We've done a tremendous amount of research in the (Charlotte) Harbor,” Mr. Bebak said.

The development of Mote's education programs and a possible facility in Punta Gorda would be a boon to business, said Charlotte County Tourism and Convention Bureau Director Lorah Steiner.

“There is a tremendous love of Mote because of the research they do and the education within the state,” she said. “It would be a much needed attraction in Charlotte County.”

For more information, visit [www.mote.org](http://www.mote.org) |



## Florida Weekly nets 27 awards, best in state

The Florida Press Association named Florida Weekly the best weekly newspapers in the state after the publications garnered 27 journalism...



## Audubon monitors record-high coastal water temperatures

The world gasped when South Florida's coastal water temperatures reached the upper 90s °F, shattering records and shocking locals and...



## Collaboratory gives scholarships totaling \$1.15M to 164 recipients

Collaboratory recently granted \$1,155,834 and 164 scholarships to local high school seniors, undergraduate, graduate students and adult learners from Charlotte,...

[Load More](#)

