

**CITY OF PUNTA GORDA, FLORIDA
SPECIAL CITY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES
WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2020, 10:00 A.M.**

COUNCILMEMBERS PRESENT: Carey, Cummings, Matthews, Miller, Prafke

CITY EMPLOYEES PRESENT: City Manager Murray; City Attorney Levin; City Clerk Smith

Mayor Matthews called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m., followed by the Pledge of Allegiance.

NEW BUSINESS

Discussion of 2021 Legislative Priorities

Mayor Matthews called for public comment from the audience.

Mr. Bill Dryburgh voiced concern moving forward would have a negative effect on City Council's relationship with the Charlotte County Board of County Commissioners (BCC). Ms. Pamela Seay, former Charlotte County Airport Authority (CCAA) Commissioner, stated ideas for economic development and Public/Private Partnerships (PPP) had been researched since 2017, explaining a consultant was hired in 2019 to present opportunities which included PPPs; however, the CCAA chose not to consider same. She opined Council's willingness to examine the issue was a positive, concluding legislators supported the concept.

Mr. Robert Hancik, CCAA Commissioner, stated the majority of CCAA Commissioners were not interested in privatization, stressing funds generated by the airport needed to remain with the airport. He pointed out there had been no firm proposal, and no commercial airline airport in the United States had leased their entire airport for a period of 40 years. He urged City Council to withdraw its legislative request related to the airport.

Mr. James Herston, CCAA Chairman, stated the possibility of a \$1 billion investment to be made at the airport had nothing to do with the economic impact that investment would have on the region. He opined City Council should run the City and let the CCAA run the airport.

Mr. Jerry O'Halloran asserted no airports had been successful with privatization, suggesting the airport be left as is.

Mr. Larry Hofmeister urged City Council to turn down the proposal.

City Manager Murray announced Mr. Jerry Paul was not able to attend the meeting this date due to a scheduling conflict. He then read citizens comments received via email into the record: Mr. Bill Ringlestein requested City Council withdraw its legislative

request; Mr. Carlton Parsons wrote regarding the history of the airport; Mr. Dean Ayers suggested the operation of the airport be left to the aviation experts.

Mayor Matthews announced the City's legislative priorities submitted to Senator Michael Grant's office were being readdressed due to the amount of controversy surrounding same. She explained the CCAA's consultant had contacted City Manager Murray the previous week to inquire if City Council was interested in hearing a presentation regarding a Public/Private Partnership (PPP) with the Punta Gorda Airport. She stated the City was not trying to undermine the CCAA or the BCC, nor was there a burning desire to run the airport, adding it was an opportunity to help the airport provide long term financial stability and economic development opportunities. She stated the City's request to look at the airport PPP came from long standing public discussions that demonstrated substantial potential for the community, noting several former and current CCAA commissioners saw promise in the opportunity which would continue the good work of the CCAA and provide guarantees for the general aviation community. She opined the City's legislative agenda had fostered dialogue between all parties on this issue, adding although the conversation had degenerated to less than flattering comments, it might remind those involved that all opportunities of this magnitude should be considered. She stated as there seemed to be opposition to anyone taking another approach to leveraging assets the community had built and supported, and given the County Commissioner's request for the City to remove the item from the legislative agenda, she suggested Council discuss its position and determine the best way to move forward. She then recalled an incident where she was subjected to questioning regarding this matter by three County Commissioners during the Metropolitan Planning Organization Board. She stressed she did not want to jeopardize relationships with the CCAA or the BCC; thus, she recommended removal of the item from the legislative agenda.

Councilmember Carey stated her impression was not that the proposal was a takeover attempt, but rather it was an opportunity related to economic development for the entire region, adding Council had been asked if there was interest in learning more about same. She stated the BCC and the CCAA had declined the opportunity; however, many thought it was a good idea, including legislators. She opined acceding to the BCC's demand would not improve the relationship, voicing concern regarding Commissioner's behavior and damaging comments at their meeting the previous day. She stressed City Council was interested in the wellbeing of the airport, adding nobody should be punished or vilified for wanting more information. She concluded Mayor Matthews and all of City Council were due an apology.

Mayor Matthews agreed. She pointed out City Council did not vote on the proposal but rather had finalized its legislative agenda submission, clarifying there had been a consensus to listen to a presentation.

Councilmember Cummings concurred City Council's intent was to hear more information. He opined by staying the course, either the CCAA would recognize its importance to the sustainability and future of the region and reconsider its vote regarding the PPP proposal or the City would remain in a position to hear the proposal so as not to lose the opportunity. He spoke regarding the City's dependence on the growth of the airport and appreciation of its importance to the future of the area. He stated City Council owed it to residents to consider any proposal that could benefit the community as a whole and potentially inject \$1 billion into the airport. He stated since the CCAA and BCC had declined to hear the proposal, the City was the only remaining entity in a position to hear same, adding it was the City Council's duty to hear proposals that could contribute to the maintenance and improvement of residents' quality of life without raising taxes. He stated City Council did not answer to the BCC and should not allow that entity to influence the Council's evaluation and consideration of an opportunity. He spoke regarding the CCAA's attempts to develop options for attracting private investment capital and provided a breakdown of the dollar amounts and benefits of a \$1 billion investment opportunity. He commented there were 450 airports in the world which were privately owned and operated. He voiced concern the CCAA had refused to consider the investment opportunity despite significant support from the business, political and civic community. He stated City Council had been attacked but was not a villain nor was it the entity standing between the community and a \$1 billion investment. He stated timing was everything, adding City Council could create the conditions that this opportunity be heard. He implored members not to allow themselves to be intimidated but rather to simply do their job as elected officials to hear the proposal.

Councilmember Miller stated the CCAA had done a good job; however, he was disappointed they had not considered the proposal. He voiced disappointment the City and County could not work together on certain issues, stressing the City was a big part of the County yet with a sentence or two a relationship could be destroyed. He stated there was a lack of interest by the County in what the City was doing day in and day out. He agreed City Council had a responsibility to citizens to hear the proposal, adding now that the discussion was open it should continue as it could result in a positive outcome for everyone involved.

Councilmember Prafke stressed the importance of maintaining good relationships and collaboration; however, when she heard comments being made about greed, it showed a lack of mutual respect. She stated she had no desire to take over the airport; however, the City was not an island, clarifying the City, the Airport and the County impacted each other. She opined much more could be achieved when everyone worked and listened together. She voiced regret regarding the behavior endured by Mayor Matthews and the ill will which had resulted between parties, suggesting the legislative agenda be revised in order for everyone to move forward together.

Councilmember Cummings **MOVED** to retain the status quo and to hear the proposal.

Councilmember Carey requested the legislative agenda item be read.

Councilmember Cummings **WITHDREW** his motion.

Mayor Matthews read the legislative agenda item as follows, "Punta Gorda Airport (PGD) public/private partnership initiative (PPP). Knowing the quality and value of work that has occurred for the PPP proposal, and knowing the value that the City of Punta Gorda could derive from such a long-term partnership, the City of Punta Gorda seeks the Delegation's assistance in becoming a principal partner to the PPP in order to further evaluate and potentially execute the agreement arising from ownership of PGD."

City Manager Murray stated the legislative initiative consisted of three components: request for standing to hear the proposals; evaluation of the proposals; potential execution of an agreement arising from ownership. He reiterated the intent was to hear the information so that a determination could be made regarding whether to move forward, noting without standing that would not be possible. He emphasized it was not a request to take over the airport.

Mayor Matthews noted the current CCAA agreement was a Florida legislative document which stated if the CCAA ceased to exist or the airport ceased to operate as it did currently, all assets of the airport would revert to ownership of the County. She stated it was possible that what was proposed was for that document to be changed so that the City would gain ownership of those assets. She stated City Council needed to decide whether to make changes to its legislative agenda as well as whether to listen to the proposal.

Councilmember Carey stated City Council would likely not hear the proposal if they had no standing.

Councilmember Miller pointed out it was necessary for the legislature to make a decision before anything happened. He reiterated Council just wanted to have more discussion about the proposal and to be able to consider these types of issues.

Councilmember Prafke suggested it was not necessary to go through the legislative process at this point, suggesting the CCAA, BCC and City Council determine the best course of action collaboratively. She concluded the goal was to better the entire community.

Councilmember Cummings maintained there was no proposal if the City did not have standing.

Councilmember Miller stated if the City did not proceed with a legislative approach, the proposal would not be discussed any further. He stated it was desirable for all parties to work together, but nothing could force them to do so.

Councilmember Cummings stressed listening to the proposal would keep the conversation alive.

Councilmember Carey voiced concern neither the CCAA nor the BCC wanted to collaborate with the City nor was the City consulted about their projects, opining with billions of dollars at stake, now was not the time to begin collaboration.

Councilmember Cummings stated the legislature's support empowered City Council and the community.

Councilmember Cummings **MOVED** to maintain the status quo and retain the legislative agenda item, **SECONDED** by Councilmember Carey.

VOTING AYE: Carey, Cummings.

VOTING NAY: Matthews, Miller, Prafke.

MOTION FAILED.

Councilmember Prafke **MOVED** to remove the PPP item from the City's legislative agenda, **SECONDED** by Councilmember Miller.

VOTING AYE: Matthews, Miller, Prafke.

VOTING NAY: Carey, Cummings.

MOTION CARRIED.

Mayor Matthews stated City Council could further discuss a potential conversation with the consultant, suggesting perhaps it could be an item for next year's legislative agenda.

City Manager Murray clarified the City did not initiate the proposal, come up with the idea or attempt to force anyone into moving forward, explaining staff was asked whether City Council was interested in a discussion. He reiterated the City's desire to work together with the BCC and CCAA as that was in the best interests of the community, concluding staff would continue to strive to build those partnerships.

Mayor Matthews stated she would welcome the opportunity to meet with the CCAA to have a discussion at some point.

COUNCIL MEMBER COMMENTS

CAREY: Stated she hoped the animosity could be left behind, voicing concern the decision sent the message to the BCC that the City caved to the bully in the room.

PRAFKE: Stated she hoped the message to the BCC was one of collaboration; however, she wished more thought had gone into some of the comments made.

CUMMINGS: Stated he was fearful the City had lowered its position as a political body.

MILLER: Agreed collaboration was preferable, opining the PPP should have been considered more fully; however, the legislative process which was creating much dissention was not the way to proceed.

MATTHEWS: Voiced concern any legislative attempt to disband the CCAA would result in a further loss of home rule, adding when municipalities lost the ability to make decisions at the local level, management of government and the citizenry became more difficult. She reiterated she would welcome a joint meeting with the CCAA to move things forward together for the betterment of all; however, if the County Commission did not wish to participate, she was amenable to same.

Councilmember Cummings reiterated the Airport was important to the community and the entire region, and the decisions made by the CCAA impacted the City.

CITIZENS' COMMENTS

Mr. Herston opined the County Commissioners were inquisitive and skeptical, adding they wanted to learn who was involved. He stated the move made by the City likely opened the door for further discussion, adding the CCAA had some work to do; however, he was uncertain whether the issue would be reconsidered.

Mr. Hancik stated City Council had every right to look at and listen to the consultant's proposal, noting the language in the legislative agenda item was interpreted to mean a possible takeover of the airport.

Ms. Kathleen Coppola, CCAA, explained she rejected the proposal due to the possible loss of the 139 certificate, noting without same the CCAA would not be involved in decisions such as what airlines could operate at the airport. She objected to the sale of the certificate to the highest bidder.

Ms. Seay voiced disappointment in the Council's decision, opining the CCAA had abdicated their responsibility by refusing to consider a proposal. She stressed the importance of the airport and its value to the community.

Mr. O'Halloran reiterated his comments regarding privatization of airports, suggesting the subject could be brought up again in one year's time.

Mr. Hofmeister explained there was no guarantee of success in aviation.

Mayor Matthews concluded the decision made was the best thing for the City at this moment in time. She wished everyone happy holidays.
The meeting was adjourned at 11:21 a.m.

Mayor

City Clerk