



Sarah Owen, president & CEO of the Southwest Florida Community Foundation, welcomes the community to tour the foundation's new home, The Collaboratory, on Sunday in downtown Fort Myers.
KINFAY MOROTI/THE NEWS-PRESS

Collaboratory a place to work on the future

A bit of Fort Myers' past officially has a new, ambitious purpose

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USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

The transformation of the former downtown Fort Myers train depot from a museum of Old Florida to a portal for the future relies not just on the physical change but also with change wrought by Southwest Florida residents.

A celebration of the depot's transformation into

a public-private partnership now called the Collaboratory was held Sunday with The Southwest Florida Community Foundation hosting an open house, public tours and a party at Bennett-Hart Park, next to the building just off Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

"It's fantastic," said Cole Peacock, a former board

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gether as one of a dozen changes in the state constitution proposed by the state Constitutional Revision Commission.

The amendment will need 60 percent of the vote to pass.

The Florida Constitution requires a review every 20 years and grants the commission the power to submit the questions to voters following a yearlong process of soliciting public opinion.

Members of the Constitutional Revision Commission defend the decision to combine two issues in a single ballot question. They say the practice is steeped in a state tradition, dating back more than 40 years, that mandates a fresh look at the constitution every 20 years.

"We grouped like-minded subject matters, just like all the other commissioners did, and put them on the ballot," said former state Sen. Lisa Carlton, a commission member. "The CRC started out with 2,000 ideas; from those 2,000 ideas, you are left with 20 ideas that are going to be considered."

Carlton was a sponsor of Amendment 9 provision that would ban vaping in the workplace. She co-sponsored the companion measure in the Amendment 9 referendum, the proposal to create a constitutional ban on drilling for oil in offshore state waters.

"The commission looked at it as sort of our environmental subject amendment for voters to consider," Carlton said. "This is an environmental choice for the voters."

Each ballot question has serious implications for two major industries, tobacco and petroleum, by restricting the operation of major profit centers. Each question also has intense support among people who don't want oil drilling in the sea or vapor puffing in the next cubicle.

Florida has prohibited drilling for oil in state-owned waters — extending 10.5 statute miles into the Gulf of Mexico on the west coast and 3.3 miles into the Atlantic Ocean on the east coast. Voters will decide if the restriction belongs in the constitution.

The current restriction can be removed by vote of the Legislature and approval of the governor.

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member and consultant to the the Southwest Florida Museum of History, which was previously housed at the depot. "It is great to see something like this in downtown Fort Myers. It shows the city is growing up."

Peacock said that the use of the building, once a segregated train station with separate bathrooms, benches and water fountains for white and black passengers, made sense.

"We've seen the good, bad and ugly in Florida," he said. "That no longer exists, as least as long as the Collaboratory works."

Trish Francher, with the nonprofit Keep Lee County Beautiful organization, said the Collaboratory would be a great asset to the county.

"I think it's beautiful," she said. "It's an amazing program they've put together. We're all competing for the common good instead of all of us trying to do our own thing."

Plans for the Collaboratory is more than just a home base for the Southwest Florida Community Foundation. Foundation officials said the new site is expected to bring together other nonprofits and residents to foster growth and expansion in the area.

"We're not here to show you the building but to imagine what can happen here," said Sarah Owen, foundation president and CEO. "What is it that we can create together? We just don't know what's going to happen next. We really can't wait to see."

Among those hopes are the revitalization of Fort Myers' Midtown area and the expansion of downtown.

But it's not just the city that will benefit, said Larry Hobbs, chairman of the foundation.

"The concept will hopefully attract millennials, nonprofits and philanthropics to work together," he said. The Collaboratory will spread its wealth among the five-county Southwest Florida region, Lee, Collier, Charlotte, Glades and Hendry counties.

"There are groups that are already meeting here," Hobbs said. "It's just starting."

Those taking the 10-minute tour of the old depot, now morphed into a freshly painted and redirected workspace, seemed impressed.



Foundation officials said the new site is expected to bring together other nonprofits and residents to foster growth and expansion in the area.

"It's phenomenal," said Liz Abbot, a local actress long active in community affairs, after seeing where segregated bathrooms are now simply restrooms, and where color-separated waiting rooms are now "idea rooms."

"Sometimes Lee County blows my mind," she said. "I have chills. It gives me a feeling that we are going to be doing great things."

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TOP: Hundreds of people toured The Collaboratory, housed in the old Fort Myers train depot.

LEFT: Sarah Owen, president & CEO of the Southwest Florida Community Foundation, welcomes the community to tour the foundation's new home. PHOTOS BY KINFAY MOROTI/THE NEWS-PRESS