

# Sanibel And The Grand Canyon

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When Teddy Roosevelt first gazed upon the Grand Canyon, an aide reportedly said to him, “What shall we do with it, Mr. President?”

TR’s reply: “Nothing. It can’t be improved upon.”

The ultimate Rough Rider may not have started the conservation movement, but he certainly moved it up a few notches on the national agenda. And his Grand Canyon comment -- apocryphal or not --might be viewed today as a sort of baseline against which the ongoing tension between conservation and development can be measured.

In a pristine world, Teddy’s comment might once have been uttered about Sanibel. But unlike the canyon, people don’t come here just to gaze. They tend to stay and live here -- a good thing, we think, else we would not be residing on this island that we have all grown to love.

When it comes to much of our island, however, it can’t really *be* improved upon, which is why the Sanibel ethos reflects a determination to preserve that which remains pristine and undeveloped.

## **The Greater Challenge**

The greater challenge, perhaps, is allowing for the kind of development that we judge as either necessary or desirable, without unduly encroaching upon the unique beauty, harmony, and environmental quality of the natural world that envelops us here.

This is a difficult balancing act that we on Sanibel have been engaged in for decades. And, although not every decision made along the way in this effort has met with instant and universal approval, it is hard to argue with the results to date. These can perhaps best be summed up by observing the degree to which we have succeeded in abiding by these words from the Sanibel Vision Statement:

*“The City of Sanibel chooses to remain unique through a development pattern which reflects the predominance of natural conditions and characteristics over human intrusions. All forms of development and redevelopment will preserve the community’s unique small town identity.”*

And how well have we measured up to this standard? The evidence, I think, is clear and abundant. Consider that the predominance of those “natural conditions and characteristics” meets and delights the senses and nourishes the spirit of all who visit and live on this incomparable island -- just as we daily experience the fruits of having accommodated those “human intrusions” in a way that preserves the small town character of our community.

None of this has happened by accident. And none of it will survive by indifference.

The 1974 incorporation and early development of Sanibel as an independently governed city within Lee County led to the Sanibel Plan, a model of environmentally sensitive development that has gained international acclaim. And over the years, all those who are dedicated to that plan, and to the vision statement, have built upon each others’ efforts to protect this island while meeting the challenges of a growing and prosperous community.

### **Milestones Along The Way**

Is there specific evidence of this success “on the ground?” We need only look at the significant milestones along the way. Here are just a few of the more recent ones:

-- The bridge. It was literally decades ago that Lee County first proposed replacing the Sanibel drawbridge and causeway islands with an enormous, single span bridge that would have leapt from the mainland to Sanibel in one great arc. After years of vigorous debate, fierce opposition, a lawsuit, and endless attempts at resolution, the drawbridge was replaced, but we have retained most of the low profile bridge and the islands forming the causeway that brings us so gently onto Sanibel.

-- Pond Apple Park. Developers had planned to install a huge commercial and resort complex at the intersection of Periwinkle Way and Bailey Road. Most islanders were appalled at the prospect of such a high-density development set literally at the entrance to our island; we were looking for ways to ease traffic congestion, not multiply it exponentially. Again, individuals, groups, and key members of the City government rose to oppose the development. The plan was eventually abandoned, as the City purchased the commercially zoned parcel of the site and preserved the undeveloped land as Pond Apple Park.

-- The Charter Amendments. In 2004, a group of residents, including members of the Committee of the Islands, met to draft what have come to be known as the Charter Amendments. Their plan was to enshrine in the City Charter -- which cannot be changed without voter approval -- some of the basic land use regulations that make Sanibel unique. These included not only limitations on building height and residential development

intensity, but also provisions to increase the independence of the Planning Commission. These amendments were approved by the voters in the March 2005 election.

### **Protecting Against Encroachments**

As we mentioned above, none of this happens by accident; none of it survives by indifference. The Committee of the Islands has long fought to preserve Sanibel against such encroachments. Not only, for example, was it instrumental in drafting the Charter Amendments, but it also appropriately dubbed them “The Peoples Choice Amendments” and pursued the campaign — funded by our members’ donations -- that put them on the ballot and led to their approval by the voters.

As we draw our attention back to the vision statement, we see that it further describes Sanibel as...

*“...a barrier island sanctuary, one on which a diverse population lives in harmony with the island's wildlife and natural habitats. The Sanibel community must be vigilant in the protection and enhancement of its sanctuary characteristics.”*

Can Sanibel be improved upon? Maybe. But maybe, too, the best way to do that is to “be vigilant”.... and to keep improving upon our own efforts to protect this island’s uniqueness.

Teddy Roosevelt would approve.

*Note: Committee of the Islands invites you to email your comments to us at [coti@coti.org](mailto:coti@coti.org). You can find other commentaries on island issues at our website: [coti.org](http://coti.org).*

