

Will City Council vote to uphold the Sanibel Plan?

By Barbara Joy Cooley, President, Committee of the Islands

The Sanibel Plan, adopted in 1976, is the comprehensive land-use plan that keeps Sanibel Sanibel. It won the 2007 National Planning Landmark Award from the American Planning Association. It is nationally known in planning circles. The Sanibel Code *must* be in compliance with the Sanibel Plan, and virtually all candidates for Sanibel City Council swear to uphold the Sanibel Plan.

Recently, the Sanibel Planning Commission voted 5 to 2 that a proposed ordinance to remove the ban on boat docks in the bay beach zone is inconsistent with the Sanibel Plan. The issue then went before the City Council for a public hearing.

The reason the Planning Commission voted as they did is that the Sanibel Plan states that “the prohibition on docks in San Carlos Bay where they constitute a threat to sea grasses should be continued.” This statement supports the docks ordinance that City Council enacted in 1993, which prohibits docks in the bay beach zone (from Woodring Point to Lighthouse Park). The reason the ordinance was enacted? To protect sea grasses.

In the 17 years since, nobody has challenged this ban on docks in the bay beach zone until very recently. Now, the owners of seven properties have hired an attorney to challenge the ban because they want to build docks, even though six of them bought their properties after the ban was in place.

These owners did not register any complaint about the Sanibel Plan when it went through its regular Evaluation and Appraisal Report process in 1997 and 2007, after the 1993 ban on docks. But now, suddenly, they are challenging the Plan and the code that bans the docks.

This Is Nothing New

In a way, this is nothing new. Ever since Sanibel incorporated as a city, its environmentally protective codes have been challenged from time to time. As a city, Sanibel has historically stood up to these challenges and upheld its Plan and Code.

But is that now about to change? At Tuesday’s city council meeting, three of the five council members appeared to be considering lifting the ban on docks, even though the Plan states that it should be continued.

The expert testimony from both the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation and the City’s Natural Resources director confirms that docks are damaging to sea grasses. Yet certain council members seem to want to overlook that expert testimony.

Vice Mayor Mick Denham made it clear that he is frustrated to see his longstanding efforts to protect the bay's water quality and its sea grasses potentially undermined by a few of his fellow council members. Council member Peter Pappas expressed a similar view, and pointed out that on Sanibel, we have many of our property rights restricted in order to protect the environment. This is what gives our island its special uniqueness.

Furthermore, a year ago, the National Marine Fisheries Service designated the small tooth sawfish's habitat as "critical." Sanibel's bay beach zone is entirely within this designated critical habitat. The sea grasses are an essential element of this habitat.

Why would some Sanibel leaders, who have repeatedly said they want to protect this habitat from threats such as the polluting releases of water from Lake Okeechobee, now want to consider an action that would threaten the sea grasses in this habitat? Why would they want to undermine the Sanibel Plan in spite of their campaign promises to never do so? Instead, isn't it time once again to stand and fight for the Sanibel Plan and Vision?

The next public hearing and the council's vote on this issue is scheduled to begin at 9:15AM on Tuesday, October 19, at City Hall. If you care about the Sanibel Plan, mark your calendars. You can also send your comments to City Council by emailing them to: sancouncil@mysanibel.com.

You can find further commentaries on this and other island issues on the Committee of the Islands website at: coti.org.
