

Who is the Committee of the Islands?

By Barbara Joy Cooley

In a recent conversation, a friend asked “Who are the members of the Committee of the Islands? Who joins and why?”

The answer is rooted both in history and in the present. The Committee of the Islands is as old as the City of Sanibel. It emerged from the effort to incorporate Sanibel as an independent city to protect it against overdevelopment by the county. In fact, the two groups that were clamoring for the city to incorporate actually merged to form the Committee of the Islands after their incorporation efforts succeeded.

Before incorporation, there was a Sanibel Planning Board whose members were concerned about Lee County plans to allow for ten times more housing units on Sanibel than the number that currently exists. Under these plans, the total population of the island was projected to be 90,000.

At that time (1974), a group called Sanibel Tomorrow had formed to work actively for Sanibel’s incorporation. It was led by a woman named Zelda “Zee” Butler. The group succeeded on November 5, 1974, when 84 percent of Sanibel’s electorate went to the polls and 63.6 percent of them voted for Sanibel to incorporate. The next week, on November 1, Zee resigned from Sanibel Tomorrow so that she could run for the first Sanibel City Council.

The new chair of Sanibel Tomorrow, Bill Kimball, appointed Arthur Hunter as Sanibel Tomorrow’s Special Campaign Chairman, and the group endorsed five candidates for Council. By the end of the year, the Sanibel Planning Board dissolved and pledged \$5000 of its funds to Sanibel Tomorrow to assist with the campaign.

By July 21, 1975, Sanibel Tomorrow and the Sanibel Planning Board no longer existed; instead, the active participants of both groups incorporated as the Committee of the Islands. It functioned as both an advocate for island preservation and a political committee, right from the start. As founding Committee of the Islands board member Milena Eskew says, “The businesses had a group, the Chamber of Commerce, to represent their interests. The realtors had an organization to represent their interests. We needed a group to represent the interests of the residents of the islands, and that is what the Committee of the Islands became.”

On December 3, 1974, Porter Goss, Vernon MacKenzie, Zee Butler, Charles LeBuff, and Francis Bailey were elected to the first Sanibel City Council.

Residents contribute \$300,000

In its first year, due to lawsuits and actions of the Lee County Commission, the city of Sanibel was not able to collect taxes and nearly went bankrupt. But 124 people, many of them members of the Committee of the Islands, gave over \$300,000 to the new city to keep it afloat.

The new city was swamped with applications for building permits, mostly for single-family houses. By April 1976, over three hundred permits were issued. The new City of Sanibel was feeling overwhelmed.

On April 21, 1976, Col. Edwin Reed, the chair of the Committee of the Islands, wrote to Porter Goss to say that the Committee was willing to help the city “make the islands a better place to live.”

To deal with the initial swamp of requests for building permits, the Committee of the Islands developed and promoted the Rate of Growth Ordinance in 1978. In 1979, Porter Goss addressed the board members of the Committee of the Islands to urge them to play a strong role in the November 1980 election. The Committee did so; in fact, at that time it went so far as to place an advertisement in the *Island Reporter* to endorse candidates for Lee County Property Appraiser, Tax Collector, County Commissioners, School Board, and Hospital Board.

In the years since, the Committee of the Islands has continued to develop and promote political and governmental tools for protecting Sanibel: the Dark Skies ordinance, Forever Wild, Pond Apple Park, and the People’s Choice Charter amendments, to name just a few. The organization also continues its government “watchdog” role; you can always find active Committee of the Islands members at important city council and planning commission meetings. The Committee then often reports on key issues addressed at such meetings in email alerts to members, on its website, and through articles in the island press.

Protecting Sanibel from overdevelopment – while allowing for development that honors the city’s Vision Statement and the Sanibel Plan – requires vigilance and effort by all islanders. The Committee of the Islands has sought, throughout its 35-year history, to provide an organization through which these efforts can be focused, to help ensure the continuity of good local government and to preserve the island’s unique and natural characteristics. To help achieve these goals, the Committee has in the past and continues today to seek out and support candidates and ballot questions that contribute to that effort. For that reason, it is duly registered as a political committee, which permits it to publicly provide such endorsements and support.

So the past and present both answer the question, “Who is the Committee of the Islands?” The answer: Residents of Sanibel who want to keep Sanibel special.

The Committee of the Islands meets regularly and encourages Sanibel residents to join and become active in its committees which focus on land use, the environment, and various aspects of City government. For more information, see www.coti.org.