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**Why We Have
To Stay In
The Parade**



Barbara Joy Cooley Mike Gillespie

by Barbara Joy Cooley, president,
and Mike Gillespie, vice president,
Committee of the Islands

In a recent conversation, a friend who is new to the island asked how it is that Sanibel came to be the way it is – in other words, why doesn't it look like Marco Island or Fort Lauderdale? How did that come to be?

The answer, as we've noted before in these columns, is rooted both in history and in the present. After the causeway was completed in 1963, the pace of change quickened on Sanibel. By the early 1970s, many islanders were very concerned that Sanibel would not be special anymore. Indeed, Lee County had plans to allow for 10 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.

Many island residents were worried about this very real possibility. To keep development under control and to protect the sanctuary character of the island, two groups engaged in a truly herculean effort for the city to incorporate: the Sanibel Planning Board and an organization called Sanibel Tomorrow. Thanks to their efforts, and the islanders who supported them, the Sanibel we know today was indeed successfully incorporated as an independently governed city within Lee County. (Afterward the two groups that helped achieve that incorporation merged in 1975 to form the Committee of the Islands, whose mission was to help protect the gains that had been made.)

It was just the beginning

The intervening years have shown that the struggle to keep Sanibel special did not end with incorporation, but began with it. Many efforts over these years – some would call it “eternal vigilance” – have been employed to protect Sanibel's environment. A poll taken in 1978 showed that building and growth continued to concern most of Sanibel voters. In response, a petition was circulated requesting that the city council adopt a Rate of Growth ordinance. On November 21, 1978, 72 percent of those voting approved the ordinance, the first of its kind east of the Rockies. The ordinance stayed in effect until 1987, by which time the island's growth had become more stable and development began to proceed at a more

acceptable pace under Sanibel's Land Development Code.

In the years since, many groups, individuals, and the city government have worked to develop tools for protecting Sanibel: The Forever Wild Amendment, which ensured that environmentally sensitive city lands could not be sold without the people's consent; the People's Choice Charter Amendments, which also required a vote of the people for the most basic of our land development codes to be changed; and, more recently, measures to prevent the bay beach zone from development prohibited by the Sanibel plan and public opposition to poorly planned mass transit proposals.

Vigilance, effort required by all

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. Think of it as a parade that continues through time, a parade that works best when people move from being spectators and join in as participants. This is especially true, paradoxically, now that so much has been accomplished. We may tend to think, because we are now so well protected against overdevelopment, that our vigilance can be relaxed – that maybe it's time to unfold a lawn chair and just watch the parade go by.

But the more recent measures cited above show that the process of keeping Sanibel special is an ongoing one, which requires the continuing support and participation of all those who love and enjoy the unique benefits of this incomparable island.

So if you want to be a part of keeping Sanibel special, don't just sit on the curb. Join the parade. Come to city council meetings to listen, to learn, and to voice your opinions. Join with groups and efforts to protect our island. Volunteer your time and contribute to them. Keep us ahead of the game. As the great tennis player Rod Laver once said, “The most vulnerable part of my game comes when I'm ahead. Never let up.”

The Committee of the Islands is proud to have played a part in each of the causes and efforts referred to above. As always, we welcome your ideas and input about this and other island issues. Please visit our website at www.coti.org, or send us your thoughts via email to coti@coti.org. ✨

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