

Resort Redevelopment: The System Worked



by Larry Schopp, Board Member, Committee of the Islands

In case you hadn't noticed, Sanibel has a new ordinance on the books that tells resort property owners what they may and may not do when they redevelop their aging, outmoded properties. The city council action took place on June 7, but you could easily have missed the event. That's not to say it wasn't an important milestone. It clearly was. It just didn't trigger any sort of passionate public debate. In many other communities, and even on Sanibel just a few years ago, the occasion might have been marked by angry words as pro-development and anti-development advocates staked out positions. After all, rewriting the rules on redevelopment has the potential to change the character

of a community. So what was different this time?

What went right?

I can think of two reasons the process went so smoothly, without so much as a hint of acrimony. One was the way council orchestrated the process, while the other is more a reflection of what I believe is the maturation of Sanibel as a community – and I don't mean the aging of its citizens. I'm talking about a developing sense among island residents and non-resident property owners alike of what really makes Sanibel such a unique place and how we can best keep it that way by finding common ground.

First, as to the process: When city council asked the planning commission to take on the issue of resort redevelopment in the spring of 2010, it clearly defined the planners' mission in a guidance document based on the Sanibel Plan which became known as the "key ingredients." Council is the policymaking body on Sanibel. City council, not the planning commission, should set the ground rules. With that done, the commission's role was simplified. The hearings that took place during the next year focused on completing the mission, not defining it. The result was a well-crafted piece of legislation that city council could embrace.

A movement to the center

What about the second reason? Have people on Sanibel really moved closer to the center and away from the fringes on issues like redevelopment? I may be wrong but I think they have. I sense a lessening of tension between groups traditionally at odds. Perhaps it started with the adoption of the 2005 charter amendments, which made it clear that (with limited exceptions) building height, residential density and developed

area could not be increased without voter approval. With those issues, in effect, taken out of play as the work of legislating redevelopment started, the process focused more on things that were realistically attainable and less on those that weren't. Or perhaps it is simply the realization that Sanibel's allure is attributable more to its focus on conservation than the panache of its resorts. Sanibel is never going to be another Naples. Nor can other communities hope to emulate what Sanibel has to offer by merely paying lip service to conservation while they develop their beaches. It's really a way of life. I believe that's what sets this place and the people who live and choose to own property here apart.

I think that movement to the center applies as well to those of us who might have drawn a line in the sand and said "no way" to some key concessions that had to be made for the process to work. I'm talking about potential hot button issues like redevelopment at existing non-conforming density and reconstruction of pools in the Gulf Beach Zone. Those concessions (which were very important to the process of resort redevelopment) will not change the ambiance on Sanibel. I doubt they will even be noticed, yet they could have derailed the process had there been organized opposition. Compromise doesn't have to mean selling out. One can engage in give-and-take to achieve a common goal without betraying principles. It takes perspective – a sense of what, in the final analysis, is important and what is not – by people on both sides of an issue. That's what we accomplished.

How often can we honestly say "the system worked?" Not as often as we like perhaps, but in the case of resort redevelopment, I think we can and it's a good feeling. Let's hope it happens again.

Committee of the Islands also invites your comments and ideas on this important subject. You can email us at coti@coti.org and check our website at www.coti.org.✪

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