

A Fresh Look at a Sanibel “Town Center”

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“If at first you don’t succeed try and try again.” City Council is putting the old adage to new use by taking a fresh look at the idea of a Town Center on Sanibel - a place for community activity, special events and public assembly.

As many will recall, the last effort at developing plans for a Town Center a few years back was a failure. Why did it fail? It focused primarily on residential and commercial development on the former Nave property (where the Bean is located) instead of better integration of existing institutional properties and creation of a suitable venue for public activity.

At Councilman Marty Harrity’s suggestion, City Council recently decided to revisit the issue and has asked Mr. Harrity to lead the effort. Item number one on his agenda appears to be to listen to what people on Sanibel think about the issue - before plans are developed. One problem with the last effort was that plans were developed first and a “full court press” then put on by an outside consulting firm to sell them to a skeptical public. It didn’t work.

Barbara Cooley, president of Committee of the Islands, and I were recently invited by Mr. Harrity to meet with him and the City Manager to talk about our organization’s vision for a Town Center. We liked the approach and accepted the invitation.

Any discussions about development on Sanibel should start by consulting the Sanibel Plan, so that’s where we started. As it turns out, there hasn’t been a clear mandate in the Plan to establish a Town Center as a place for public assembly or community activity. It had been identified historically as something to “consider.” In fact, as the Plan has evolved during recent years, the term Town Center has been dropped and the focus has shifted somewhat.

What does the Sanibel Plan tell us?

The sections of the 1997 version of the Plan that dealt with Recreation and Open Space Goals and Other Human Support Systems, said simply “*Consider development of a Town Center / Town Square in the area of City Hall to serve as a focal point for community activity, special events and informal assembly.*” That language was changed in the Plan amendments of 2007. The references to Town Center and City Hall were dropped. The operative provision currently reads “*Consider development of an area to serve as a focal point for community activity, special events and informal assembly.*” The reason for the change was the creation of Community Park. The following statement appears as part of background discussion: “*Another focal point for community activity, special events and informal assembly is being provided by the development of the Sanibel Community Park in the area adjacent to the Sanibel Community Association.*”

Community Park as an alternative focal point

Given the Plan’s shift to Community Park as a focal point for special events and public assembly, we think the City should consider ways to make Community Park a better venue for those activities. Anyone who has been to events like Taste of the Islands in Community Park knows that there is just not enough shade in the park. For that reason the usefulness of the park as a gathering place is diminished. One way to improve shade cover would be to plant 10 to 12 mature shade trees like live oaks, strangler figs or other similar native species. In little time the park would become a better gathering place, much like Gulfside Park was before the Australian pines were removed after hurricane Charlie. Other enhancements could be considered as well to complete the transformation.

The surrounding institutional properties

The institutional properties in the Town Center area like BIG ARTS, the Community Association, the Sanibel Library and St. Michaels and All Angels Church probably all have plans to improve or expand to increase their appeal to their members and the public. Whether we call it the Town Center or something else, those properties, together with an improved Community Park, would constitute the de facto civic or cultural center of the City.

The recently expanded shared use paths, which now connect institutional properties on Dunlop and Wooster with Periwinkle Way, make that much more of a practical reality. Appropriate night time lighting on those paths would make them more useable so that evening event goers could park at a greater distances from an event and walk securely to their cars afterwards.

We believe the City should work cooperatively with institutional and private property owners to insure that their plans are consistent with the City's broad goals. Unlike the last go around, we believe that can and should be accomplished without the expenditure of additional public funds.

Commercial and residential development

The Sanibel Plan does not link the Town Center concept to a need for additional commercial or residential development in the greater Town Center area - the area which includes Palm Ridge Road, the northern part of Tarpon Bay Road and the former Nave property. Moreover, given current economic conditions, one could certainly question the need for additional retail space on Sanibel. Nevertheless, there are parcels in this area which are suitable for development or redevelopment, some as of right, others (those that are non - conforming) possibly not without variances. Marketplace factors will ultimately determine what becomes of those properties. However, our goal should still be that any development or redevelopment be undertaken in conformity with the Sanibel Plan and Land Development Code.

Where do we go from here?

We think the process has gotten off on the right track, but it's too early to judge how it will turn out. As Mr. Harrity observed during our meeting, it could all lead to nothing or something very beneficial for Sanibel. We hope it's the latter and wish him and City Council success. What advice do we offer? (1) Let's learn from our past mistakes. (2) Let's be guided by the Sanibel Plan and Vision Statement in whatever we do. (3) Let's keep it simple and accomplish those things that are within our grasp, even if they are not all we had hoped for. It's the successes that will be remembered.

Committee of the Islands invites your input and ideas on this important subject. Please email your comments to coti@coti.org. You can read commentaries on other island issues on our website at coti.org and / or visit us on Facebook.