



COMMITTEE OF THE ISLANDS

Winter 2012 Newsletter

Letter From The President

Keeping Sanibel Special

Almost everyone likes to avoid controversy, but there are times when we must fight for what is right or we must protect what needs to be protected. The Committee of the Islands was born out of such a controversy, when some people in Lee County wanted to allow enough housing units to be built on Sanibel to accommodate about 90,000 people.

Two groups fought the political battle that led to incorporation of the City of Sanibel to protect it from overdevelopment: the Sanibel Planning Board, and Sanibel Tomorrow. After incorporation happened, these two groups merged to form the Committee of the Islands.

Carrying on the legacy

You, the members of the Committee of the Islands, carry on that legacy of keeping Sanibel special. While the battle for incorporation was won back in 1975, the intervening years have shown that protecting the island from overdevelopment is an ongoing effort – one that requires vigilance and effort by all islanders.

For example, we now know that it is important to continue to educate island residents about the significance of alligators in our environment, the essential presence of mangroves, and the environmentally sensitive nature of areas like the bay beach zone. We need to be sure Sanibel residents understand the rules we have for protecting these environmental assets. It is a job that never ends as people come and go on Sanibel.

Mission Statement

The Committee of the Islands was established in 1975 by those involved in the incorporation of Sanibel as an independent city within Lee County, to help ensure the continuity of good local government, to protect the environment, and to preserve the sanctuary character of our barrier island community.

We also know that upholding the Sanibel Plan is essential to ensuring that its protections are not whittled away, resulting in an erosion of the island's sanctuary nature.

And so we focus our efforts on ensuring the continuity of good local government and preserving the island's unique characteristics. When someone asks you "who is the Committee of the Islands?" you can answer: it is us, the people who want to keep Sanibel special.

Thank you for your membership, and your continuing support.

*Barbara Joy Cooley, president
Committee of the Islands*

Save The Date...

The annual meeting for members of the Committee of the Islands will be on Thursday, March 22, 2012, 9:30 to noon, at the Sanibel Community House, 2173 Periwinkle Way. Our special keynote speaker for the event will be announced in coming weeks.

Our Tax Dollars At Work -- Or Not Are Buses On Sanibel Still An Issue?

In our Winter 2008 Newsletter, we reported to you about a U S Department of Transportation Study in connection with the J N "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge which was to initially cost \$750,000 (and has now been increased to \$1,500,00). This study was to seek "alternative transportation options to reduce the number of vehicles entering environmentally sensitive property within the City of Sanibel and at the J N "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge.

Committee of the Islands was initially optimistic that such a study might be helpful in suggesting methods whereby vehicular traffic congestion on Sanibel could be ameliorated during the peak season. Accordingly we have participated in all of the public workshops that were conducted by the Project Managers since January 2008 and also have communicated with the Council and the other City persons involved.

Was optimism premature?

However, it appears that our optimism may have been premature; in our view, the Study had accomplished little. This was reported to you by our president, Barbara Joy Cooley, in a commentary entitled, "Buses 'preferred' on Sanibel? Preferred by whom?" The commentary was published in the *Island Reporter* and the *Island Sun* on April 8, 2011 (you can now find the piece on our website at coti.org).
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Our Tax Dollars At Work -- Or Not

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The problems with the Study are set forth in detail in the commentary. They range from a failure to collect essential data to an effort to justify an apparently preformed conclusion -- namely that buses should be used not only within the Refuge but also outside the Refuge on Sanibel. This conclusion was not justified by any of the data and was overwhelmingly rejected by the Sanibel citizens who attended these public meetings. The data indicated that buses outside of the Refuge would not alleviate traffic congestion, and would in fact contribute to such congestion.

Your Committee has consistently made our views known to the major participants in this project: the Refuge, Lee County (through Lee Tran), as well as the City. At the last public meeting on April 13, 2011, we were hopeful that the Study would conclude with only recommendations for transportation changes within the Refuge. At that meeting both Paul Tritaik, Refuge Manager and Steve Myers, Lee Tran Director, stated that they could not support any finding for a "Locally Preferred Alternative" that essentially involved buses or other such vehicles outside of the Refuge proper.

Meeting set for March

We do not yet know what the final recommendation of the participants and the Project Managers will be. Another public meeting has now been tentatively scheduled for March 22, 2012, from 4:30 PM until 6:30 PM at the Sanibel Community House. We encourage all of you to attend this meeting and make your opinions known. We have observed that the participants and the Project Managers are impressed by the number of citizens who attend, or do not attend, whether or not they accept our arguments.

Sewer Debt: Help The City, Help Yourself

The Sanibel City Council did well in managing the 2012 budget process. Despite a 20% decrease in property values since 2007, the City has managed to reduce expenses over the intervening years, avoiding the need to increase ad valorem taxes next year. There is, however, a notable exception related to the Sanibel sewer system debt.

The City and its property owners have borrowed over \$71.5 million to develop and expand the sewer system since the City of Sanibel acquired it in 1991. The non-valorum assessment on our tax bills each year provides approximately thirty-seven percent (37%) of the annual debt service payments (principal and interest) required on the state revolving fund (SRF) loans debt.

Debt coverage requirements

Because of meeting debt coverage ratio requirements next year, the City paid down the remaining SRF debt an extra \$2.2 million in 2011. This reduced the balance of the bond and SRF loans yet to be retired to about \$31 million. However, there was still a projected shortfall in meeting debt coverage ratio requirements on the debt. Therefore, city council increased sewer utility bills by 3 % for the 2012 fiscal year. Sanibel property owners received the first bill for the increased amount in November.

Starting in 2001, as residents hooked up to the sewer system, they were assessed a fee which could be paid in full at the time of connection or amortized over 20 years. As of May 1, 2011, there were 1444 residences that still had outstanding sewer assessments in the amount of nearly \$9 million. This amounts to about 29% of the total outstanding sewer debt.

Property owners can help the City and help themselves by paying off any residual debt that is being carried in their name. Since the interest rate charged on this debt is 3.0-3.5 % and current money market investments are typically paying less than 0.5%, it may make sense for many homeowners to pay off this loan. If the amount of the outstanding sewer loans were reduced, it may eliminate the need to increase residential and commercial sewer rates again in 2013.

Whom to contact

Homeowners who are interested in eliminating their outstanding sewer debt can call the City of Sanibel's Finance Department (472-9615) to find out how much they currently owe. Since the rate changes each day as interest is accumulated, the specific amount you need to pay will be determined on the day you actually give the Finance Department a check.

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 Committee of the Islands on Facebook.

This article, authored by Board Member John Harries, originally ran as a commentary that appeared in recent editions of the Island Sun and Island Reporter papers.

How Can We Preserve Sanibel?

"Eternal vigilance is the answer, and the Committee Of The Islands is part of that."

-- Porter Goss
Sanibel's first mayor

Why Do We Have A Sanibel Vision Statement?

In 1973-74, during the effort to establish Sanibel as a self-governing city, what most people envisioned was primarily a halt to rampant development on the Island and a degree of freedom from the exploitive policies of the then County government. Accordingly, when the original Sanibel Plan was adopted in 1976, it spelled out the basic ground rules for development in our new City, but it did not contain a vision statement setting forth the underlying philosophy upon which the Plan was based.

As time went on, however, Sanibel residents and community leaders grew to believe that such a statement was needed. They felt that, although the attitudes and values reflected in the original Sanibel Plan (and the 1989 Plan Revision) were visionary, the documents did not “directly and succinctly articulate the underlying ‘vision.’” Therefore, in 1996 the City embarked on a program to explicitly set forth in a formal Vision Statement those values and goals that were implicit in the existing Sanibel Plan and related ordinances.

Citizens provide input

The City hired two consultants to prepare a draft of a Vision Statement, which was then subjected to citizen review, comment, and amendment through a series of workshops, town meetings, and questionnaires. Committee of the Islands’ members participated actively in the process. When it was over, City Council directed that the consultants’ draft be included in the introductory section of the Sanibel Plan, as the Sanibel Vision Statement, where it remains to this day.

The Vision Statement was such a clear and eloquent articulation of values to guide and direct Sanibel’s future that our Board of Directors be-

lieved the Statement should also be enshrined in the City Charter, where it would have the force of law and be free from tampering without voter approval. At the Committee’s urging, a measure to add the Vision Statement to the City Charter was placed on the ballot in March 2007 and approved at the election by a majority of Sanibel voters.

A standard for judging change

New ideas for development, attractions, and changes to the Island come up all the time, sometimes posing threats to the natural beauty as well as the sanctuary and small town qualities that make Sanibel unique. The Vision Statement -- with its definition of what kind of community Sanibel chooses to be and its simple hierarchy of values -- gives us a standard against which to measure proposed changes. And, if they do indeed pose a threat to our values, to identify them as such and prevent them from being realized.

It’s On The Wall At City Hall...

“Sanibel is and shall remain a barrier island sanctuary, on which a diverse population lives in harmony with the island’s wildlife and natural habitats... Sanibel is and shall remain a small town community whose members choose to live in harmony with one another and with nature; creating a human settlement distinguished by its diversity, beauty, uniqueness, character and stewardship.”

These sentences, taken from the Sanibel Vision Statement, are displayed in large type directly behind the dais in City Hall where City Council holds its meetings. They are key phrases meant to remind all those attending -- the Council, city staff, and the audience -- what community values we have agreed upon against which to measure the issues and actions deliberated at these meetings. You can read the full Vision Statement on the Committee of the Islands website at www.coti.org.

How The City Of Sanibel Is Governed

Back in 1974, when the leaders of the movement to make Sanibel a city were making their case for incorporation to the state legislature, they also had to decide on a form of government for the soon-to-be-created city. Not all cities are governed in the same way. There are a number of possible formats. Some have elected councils to pass laws and a separately elected mayor to carry out the laws -- like the CEO of a corporation. Others have elected councils and a city manager who actually runs things on a day-to-day basis. In those cities the mayor is chosen by council from among its ranks but does not act as CEO. Sanibel falls in the latter category. Here’s how it all works:

The City Charter - The ground rules for governance of Sanibel are set out in the City Charter. The Charter, among other things, establishes the form of government by defining the legislative and administrative functions, the process for nominations and local elections and procedures for initiative, referendum and recall. It contains other provisions, called amendments, which have been added from time to time, always with the approval of the voters, sometimes initiated by the voters. The City Council does not have the authority to amend the City Charter without voter approval.

The Sanibel Plan - By state law each city must adopt a comprehensive plan for making land-use decisions. The Sanibel Plan is not merely advisory. Land-use regulations and development activities must be consistent with the requirements of the Plan and designed to
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Join Or Renew Your Membership

If you're not a Committee of the Islands member, or if you haven't renewed yet for 2012, simply use the coupon below and send it to us with the category of membership you choose. Through Committee of the Islands, you can make your voice heard and have a stronger, more effective influence on Sanibel civic matters. As a member, you will be able to:

- Receive email alerts and updates about important community issues.
- Get information from--and interact on--our website at www.coti.org.
- Email us directly at coti@coti.org with your input or questions.
- Receive newsletters like this one.
- Attend the Annual Meeting and participate in the election of the Board of Directors.

Use the coupon below to join or renew your membership today. Or you can do so via our website at www.coti.org.

Please check membership choice:
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Make check payable and mail to: Committee of the Islands P.O. Box 88, Sanibel, FL 33957
<i>Dues and donations are not tax deductible.</i>

How The City Of Sanibel Is Governed

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help achieve its goals and objectives. The Plan goes through periodic reviews and is updated as needs change. Typically, Plan amendments are enacted by ordinance by City Council with input from the Planning Commission and the public.

The City Council - The Sanibel City Council, which meets monthly, consists of five unpaid members elected on a non - partisan basis for four-year terms. Under state law, it is considered the local "governing body." Its primary function is to establish policies for management of the City's affairs and to put those policies into effect through the enactment of laws called ordinances. City Council also selects the City Manager who is a salaried employee.

The City Manager - The City Manager acts in much the same way as the chief operating officer in a corporation. She (Judie Zimomra is Sanibel's City Manager) implements the policies of the City Council through a staff whose department heads report to her.

The Planning Commission - The Planning Commission consists of seven unpaid members appointed by the City Council for staggered three year terms. Its function is to act as the local planning agency and advise City Council on land-use matters. The commissioners also act as what is known as a quasi-judicial capacity by holding hearings and rendering decisions on variance and extraordinary permit applications. Once appointed, commissioners may only be removed for cause.

The Sunshine Law - Under the state's Sunshine Law all governmental meetings must be held in public with notice of the time, place and subject of the meeting. The term "meeting" is defined very broadly. So, for example, this means City Council or

Planning Commission members may not discuss among themselves, matters which might come before their respective bodies for consideration. It's a cumbersome system, with severe penalties for violation, but it serves the purpose of assuring that local government is carried out in full public view.

How to attend City government meetings - The Sanibel City Council meets monthly, usually on first Tuesday, at 9 A. M. in McKenzie Hall (that's in City Hall). Members of the public are always welcome. Time is set aside at each meeting for public comment on agenda and non - agenda items. The Planning Commission usually meets on the second and fourth Tuesday of each month at 9 A.M. As with City Council meetings, public participation is encouraged. Official meeting notices and agendas are available online at mysanibel.com, the City's website.

Committee Of The Islands Links

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