



## CENTER 4 LIFE OPTIONS: SOME THOUGHTS & QUESTIONS

A casualty of Hurricane Irma was the cancellation of a City Council public workshop to discuss options for the deteriorating Center 4 Life facility, previously known as the Sanibel Senior Center. Last May, the Council discussed the possibility of building a new Center on a different site at an estimated cost of \$6 million, likely funded by voted public debt. The cancelled workshop is expected to be rescheduled to continue discussion of the matter.



by Mike Miller, COTI President

### **Some Background**

Although owned and operated by the City, the Center 4 Life is administered with the active assistance of Island Seniors, Inc., an independent nonprofit Florida corporation. Island Seniors serves as an advisory board to the Center, provides direction for activities, and raises funds for staffing and to defray activities expenses. The system works well. By using Island Seniors volunteers and funds, the Center can offer a broad range of outstanding activities with minimal financial burden on the city.

Center 4 Life program participants typically pay a participation fee for

each discrete activity. Participants are encouraged to join Island Seniors at an annual cost of \$20. As members, they enjoy a discount on participation fees. An exercise class, for example, costs \$4 for members, \$7 for non-members.

Island Seniors members need not be Island residents or property owners. Eligibility is based on AARP guidelines: Members should be at least age 50--but no one is turned away.

### **Center 4 Life Building Issues**

Center 4 Life's facility suffers from numerous structural limitations. Constructed in 1973, the building is nonconforming with respect to many City ordinances-including its elevation, which is below flood plain minimums. Its roof needs repair and upgrading. Its infrastructure is aging out.

Center 4 Life's current 5,080 sq ft building also houses Community Housing & Resources (CHR), as a tenant of the City. CHR occupies 735 square feet. The City is contractually obligated to provide space for CHR, although such space need not exist in the present building or in proximity to the Center 4 Life operation.

### **Needs Assessments**

In 2013 and again in 2017, a City-engaged architect performed needs assessments of the Center 4 Life operations. To capture data for these assessments, the architect interviewed the City Council, selected Recreation Department employees and Island Seniors board members. These assessments have influenced the thoughts of a new building.

But we need to go beyond these prior assessments and consider the future needs of older Sanibel residents in the context of available community programs and other resources. Performing such a broader review may avoid the risk of deciding about a building while failing to consider more critical issues of community need.

We suggest the following questions be considered at the next workshop:

### **Questions**

- What needs do older Sanibel residents have and how will they change in the future?
- What programs and activities should the City of Sanibel provide for its older citizens?
- For those programs deemed a priority, whether presently offered or not, is the Center 4 Life the appropriate organization and venue to

provide them?

- Should Center programs be available to all at the same cost, regardless of residency or age?
- For programs that the City deems it should provide, how might they be coordinated with similar programs at the Recreation Center? Should the Center 4 Life offer like programs less expensively than at the Recreation Center?
- Given the 2016 changes in Sanibel's ordinances removing the five-year accumulation provision relating to "substantial improvements," could the Center be adequately renovated without requiring the remediation of existing non-conformities?
- Can the Center's parking lot be enlarged by lot-sharing with a commercial neighbor? At least one neighboring facility has reportedly extended such an offer.
- Can activity scheduling be more time separated, to reduce parking overlap?
- Have all community resources been considered in determining whether such programs might be adequately delivered by means other than an entirely new facility-and at a lower cost to taxpayers? The Center's space crunch appears to be limited to a few activities over a period of a few months. During these crunch times, might existing multiple-use rooms at the Recreation Center, the library or even the Community House be made available (understanding that rental charges might apply)?
- Can CHR be successfully moved to another, rented location, thus providing Center 4 Life with additional space on site (and with some minimal, additional parking)?
- If Center 4 Life is moved to a new site, what will happen to the present building? Can the existing structural problems be repaired without requiring remediation of all non-conformities? If so, what will be the new use for the building?

### **Final Thoughts**

Rethinking the role, and potential facility, for Center 4 Life provides an excellent opportunity for our community to consider the best means for engaging and serving seniors in the future. And it is a necessary exercise to complete before Sanibel's citizens are asked to approve a voted debt referendum.

COTI encourages the City Council to involve the community in this effort

in thinking about alternatives for the Center and related programs and facilities. We encourage strong citizen interest and engagement in the process

As always, we welcome comments, at [coti@coti.org](mailto:coti@coti.org).

**Mike Miller, President  
Committee of the Islands**

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