

## Collective Wisdom Informs ‘COTI Conversation’

A capacity crowd offered a wide array of viewpoints and much collective wisdom at the Committee of the Islands’ second “COTI Conversation,” held Feb. 11 at the Community House. The forum, led by COTI president Mike Miller and board member Barbara Joy Cooley, prompted lively discussion—and debate—on a wide variety of topics.



COTI President Mike Miller and Board Member Barbara Joy Cooley listen intently to the views of a COTI attendee at the “COTI Conversation,” Feb. 11 at the Community House.

Cooley opened the discussion with a summary of concerns surrounding gasoline-powered leaf blowers, which she described as a health and safety problem. “Fuel-powered leaf blowers contribute ozone-damaging emissions to the environment, and ozone-contributing pollutants from small gas engines may exceed emissions from vehicles by 2020,” she said.

Cooley also decried the noise pollution caused by the blowers. She pointed to the experience of the Village of Key Biscayne, which banned the fuel-powered blowers in 2017. “The discussions held in Village Council chambers clearly included concerns about the loud noise pollution produced by this kind of leaf blower,” she said, adding, “Council members noted that the Village received many complaints about noise from leaf blowers.”

Cooley reported that battery-powered leaf blowers cost between \$300 and \$900, with batteries lasting approximately 12 hours per charge. “Since the ordinance took effect

this past February,” Cooley said, “there have been practically no complaints from contractors or others in Key Biscayne.”

During open discussion, one attendee remarked on “the absurdity of blowing leaves. Leaves are a natural part of forest ecology. [They] provide phosphorus nutrients to lawn,” he said. “Leaves create soil beds for grass. If you blow leaves, then you must supplement with fertilizers that fall into the canals and beaches. Air quality, water quality, they all connect.”

Another attendee came armed with information from the World Health Organization. “The W.H.O. set the gold standard for capping safe noise at 55 decibels,” she said. “Noise louder than this has been correlated with significant risks to cardiovascular health, increased stress, impaired sleep, and can increase risk of diabetes.”

Concurring with the majority, a third attendee noted a contradiction between blowers and the efforts of Islanders to protect wildlife. “We protect turtles. We rope off beaches for snowy plovers, we have signs that protect owls. Then we have this noise,” he said. “It is absurd. I would ban them totally.”

Cooley encouraged all attendees to support the ban at City Council’s March meeting. “It is important for all of you to be there when it is on agenda,” she said.

Miller reported on the Recreation Center’s fiscal status. “For the most recent fiscal year, the Recreation Department reported \$720,000 in revenue, but expenses, at \$2.3 million, made for a \$1.6 million deficit, exceeding the general fund subsidy cap of \$1.4 million,” he said. “The resulting shortfall of approximately \$180,000 is despite cutting expenses, reducing staff by two full-time positions, and increasing user fees.

“As membership rates have gone up, revenue hasn’t. The recreation department includes the Center 4 Life, but it generates no revenue and has some expenses,” Miller said, adding, “During the current fiscal year, City staff is performing a complete study of recreation operations and programs.”

An attendee remarked that a conversation about the future of the Rec Center has not occurred since the facility was built in 2007. “No one knew until two years ago that we don’t have a sustainable economic model,” he said.

Another commented that the City runs the Rec Center “like a community service. We taxpayers paid for the building. We could reach a place where we have a building but not much programming,” he said, adding, “The city has talked about a new Center 4 Life facility, but it has no revenue source. Why would taxpayers support another building with no revenue coming in?”

Cooley turned the discussion to the proposed Eden Oak development project near Shell Point. She reported that, in 2010, the developers pushed a project encompassing 158 acres. “It didn’t go over well, so they regrouped in 2018, with a 36-acre project, including 55 residential lots, plus boat slips,” she said.

Cooley weighed in forcefully against the project, “because it would adversely impact mangroves that protect against storm surge, because it would increase traffic congestion, and because it would damage the environment. [Developers] are not entitled to increase density, and not entitled to harm the habitat that is critically important for endangered species,” she said.

Cooley urged the group to attend the Eden Oak project hearing, 9 a.m., April 23, in the County Examiner’s office. “When it goes to the County Commission, only those having testified at the Examiner’s hearing will be allowed to testify before the Commission.”

Miller reported that Governor Ron DeSantis asked all nine members of the South Florida Water Management District to resign. He has filled one of the now-vacant seats with outgoing City Councilman Chauncey Goss. “This is a step in the right direction,” Miller said.

“COTI supports accelerating the EAA [Everglades Agricultural Area Storage] Reservoir and keeping the C43 Reservoir project on track,” Miller said. “We also support the bill mandating five-year inspections of septic systems.”

Miller reported that the Army Corps of Engineers has started work on new operational guidelines for the Lake Okeechobee water releases. “The guidelines will take four years to complete. We need to accelerate that,” he said.

Miller also reported on the need for an optimal amount of freshwater in the estuary for the health of tape grass. “This issue went to court in November. A decision has not been announced,” he said. “If we win, the WMD will be required to redo its regulatory process. If we don’t win, we must keep pressing our case.”

Cooley reported on a grant-funded study, through Florida Gulf Coast University, that will help Sanibel understand its vulnerability to sea level rise. “There are two aspects, the first is community involvement, the second is documenting the history of coastal habitat change since 1970,” she said. “Later there will be modeling of the shape that the coast line will take with sea level rise and increased storminess.”

A discussion of the shared-use path concluded “COTI Conversation.” Miller reported on a shared-use path plan update funded by the Metropolitan Planning Organization. The study involves extensive community outreach, including an online survey of the path’s efficacy. It is available to complete through April 30.

An attendee raised concerns about the dangers of electric bikes, “because of speed. In Europe e-bikes sales have doubled in recent years,” she said.

Other recommendations included “educating visitors” and “remaining open-minded about assisted-use vehicles” for individuals with infirmities.

The final comment of the afternoon came from an attendee who praised COTI's longstanding efforts on behalf of Sanibel. "You guys are doing great work!" he said.