

# COTI still influencing the shaping of Sanibel

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Although it took Mother Nature centuries to create the beauty of what is Sanibel Island, it has been the effort of a group of people to help preserve her work over the course of the last 40 years.

The Committee of the Islands has been a driving force in preserving nature and conservation of Sanibel Island, but it has not been smooth road in doing so, as the group will celebrate its 40 year anniversary this coming January.

With the island being marked as a financially prosperous target by developers back in the 1970s, the residents of Sanibel Island were not ready to give into the big profits of industrializing their little slice of heaven by paving over the trees, wildlife and other natural habitat which was growing here.



Mike Gillespie, left, and Larry Schopp hold the banner of the COTI's mission statement. BRIAN WIERIMA

Instead, they banded together to help protect the island against overdevelopment by Lee County, which back before Sanibel was incorporated in a city in 1974, owned the territory. The roots of COTI actually started in a pair of groups formed before incorporation, including the Sanibel Planning Board and a group called "Sanibel Tomorrow", which spearheaded the task of voting Sanibel as a full-fledge city.

The group was led by Zelda "Zee" Butler, and finally succeeded into incorporating Sanibel into a city on Nov. 5, 1974, with an overwhelming 63.5 percent of Sanibel's voters deciding in favor of the move.

By July 21, 1975, neither Sanibel Tomorrow nor the Sanibel Planning Board existed. In its place, one unified group was formed - The Committee of the Islands - which ultimately became the guardian of Sanibel's preservation.

"The businesses had a group, the Chamber of Commerce, to represent their interests," said founding Committee of the Islands board member Milena Eskew, in the COTI's history article found on its website. "The Realtors had an organization to represent their interests. We needed a group to represent the interests of the residents of the islands, and that is what the Committee of the Islands became."

But COTI would see many obstacles put in its way en route to preserving Sanibel Island's nature, starting with a bevy of lawsuits in its first year of being incorporated as a city. Many permits previously issued by Lee County didn't fit in Sanibel's new code, so the fight was on.

According to the COTI website, Sanibel was not able to collect taxes and nearly went bankrupt.

"But 124 people, many of them members of the Committee of the Islands, gave over \$300,000 to the new city to keep it afloat," the article stated.

Another tool COTI used was becoming a Registered Florida Political Committee, which allowed the group to endorse or oppose a candidate or ballot measure.

"We've been a registered political committee since the beginning," said Mike Gillespie, the chairman of the COTI Outreach Committee. "That allows us to support or oppose candidates and ballot measures by using advertisements and flyers."

By 1976, the city was overwhelmed with a multitude of building permits, mostly single family homes. Eventually by 1978, the Rate of Growth Ordinance was passed by the Sanibel City Council. COTI still needed strong influence to keep on their agenda of preserving the island and the city's first mayor, Porter Goss, made sure to do just that.

According to the COTI website: "In 1979, Porter Goss addressed the board members of the Committee of the Islands to urge them to play a strong role in the November 1980 election. The Committee did so; in fact, at that time it went so far as to place an advertisement in the Island Reporter to endorse candidates for Lee County Property Appraiser, Tax Collector, County Commissioners, School Board, and Hospital Board."

With the battle lines drawn between developers and the people who wanted to preserve Sanibel with its original natural beauty, a big vote came in 2005, which

ultimately secured COTI's values in stone.

'People's Choice' Amendments bolster Sanibel's preservation

In 2003, the grass roots effort of establishing rock-solid amendments in the City of Sanibel's Charter started.

There were already ordinances in place to help Sanibel control the development, but those were as strong as the paper they were written on.

"The problem with an ordinance, is any three members of the City Council can change it with a vote," Gillespie said. "We didn't see a threat exactly, and we were not on the cusp of any major development coming through. But we just felt we needed to pass them as Amendments to the Charter to make them stronger."

In essence, if an amendment is passed by the people by referendum, the only way to change that said amendment is by the vote of the people, thus making it as iron-clad as possible. COTI wanted to include three amendments on the ballot, in which they were able to do by obtaining over 560 signatures to a petition.

There was plenty of opposition with deep pockets, though, which included the Florida's State Realtors Association.

"The opposition ran a full page ad every week in the paper, and that almost bankrupted us because we had to follow suit," said COTI's Chairman of the Land Use Planning Committee Larry Schopp. "It was a very spirited campaign."

The two proving points the amendment opposition contended was that it was inappropriate to govern a republic by referendum and that's why elected officials were vote in for. The second point of emphasis was that the state of Florida already had strict growth management laws intact and that any change had to be approved by the Department of Community Affairs, which would "never improve increased density".

"We contended, yes, maybe (the DCA) is tough, but there isn't a law regarding that and we wanted the City of Sanibel to have the right to enact its own charter provision," Schopp said. "That was due just in case the state government changes its mind dealing with these restrictions, and we are still protected by our own law."

That "just in case" thought was invaluable for COTI and the City of Sanibel in the near future.

"Lo and behold, eight years later, the state legislation repealed the growth management act, and abolished the Department of Community Affairs, thus leaving nothing at the state level to protect us," Schopp said. "Thank goodness we had the foresight to do that, because the state no longer could protect us."

Finally in March, 2005, the vote was cast by the Sanibel citizens on inducting the "People's Choice" Amendments into the city's charter. The amendment which limited the residential development density passed 52 percent to 48 opposing it. The second amendment which limited the height of buildings on the island passed 53.4 percent to 46.6.

The third amendment which limited permitted impermeable converge and vegetation

removal or developed area passed 50.2 to 49.8 percent.

"I was nervous on election night," Schopp said. "It was touch and go the entire evening and we were able to win on all three amendments."

After nine years since the three amendments passages, not much has changed.

"Nobody even gives it a second thought now days," Gillespie said. "People are still developing and redeveloping non-conforming buildings. Everybody is still happy."

With the passage, though, the City's first comprehensive post-disaster build-back ordinance was installed, which allows owners of non-conforming properties the right to build back to its original size following a natural disaster, like a hurricane.

The passage of the amendments didn't change anything, since the ordinances were already in place, it just solidified them in the city's charter.

"The wording was fine (in the ordinances), they just were subject to change," Schopp said. "We felt they should not be able to change."

Over the years, COTI has stayed vigilant of their task at hand, which is stated in their mission statement, and reads, "To ensure the continuity of good local government, to protect the environment, and to help preserve the sanctuary character of our barrier island community."

Recently, COTI was instrumental in the bus ordinance, which restricts the size of buses which were transporting beach-goers to the island. Another one is the Dark Skies ordinance, which limits the "light pollution" on the island.

With 40 years passing of COTI's start, many different challenges have been posed. But one aspect remains consistent through the last four decades and that's to preserve the island and keep a guard on anything which threatens that.

Ironically, what was seen as halting progression by some before COTI took on their task, is now the most important reason why people visit Sanibel Island - because of its preserved natural beauty, with over 60-percent of the island still in its natural state.

"We're ever on alert and want to preserve those things in which we have obtained," Gillespie said. "We are here to keep Sanibel special and we've been at it since 1975."

There always will be those who will try and disrupt COTI's goal, but with the different amendments added to Sanibel's charter, it will be a very difficult task to disrupt Mother Nature's work on the island.

"People keep coming up with interesting things to do here," Schopp concluded. "Hopefully COTI will be there indefinitely, doing the things we are doing now to protect the island."