



Below is a COTI Commentary on the proposed Civic Core project.
We welcome your thoughts and comments.

COTI Has New Questions About The Civic Core Proposal

The Committee of the Islands (COTI), consistent with its mission to protect the sanctuary character of Sanibel, has raised a series of new questions about the proposed Civic and Cultural Core project. This is in addition to 15 questions that COTI sent 7 months ago to project proponents and the Sanibel City Council, that have not been addressed publicly. These questions deal with issues about the environment, taxpayer burden, operating cost-sharing, event-proliferation, parking, project scale, traffic, and more.

On December 6, 2016 the Sanibel City Council approved two public referenda for March 7, 2017. The items, if approved, would make the Civic Core project possible. One would convert 13.5 acres of conservation land near City Hall to develop the project. The other would provide \$8 million in bond funding to pay part of the cost. While COTI has not yet opposed or supported the \$42 million construction project, it continues to raise questions to assure that Sanibel citizens have sufficient information to make an informed



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decision on the largest on-island public building project in history. This commentary summarizes and further clarifies five new questions raised by COTI members at the December 6 Council meeting.

WHERE IS THE MASTER PLAN?

The wording for the \$8 million bond issue refers to, "the City's Civic and Cultural Core Master Plan." The problem with this is that there is no "Master Plan" of consequence. If there is, who has it, where is it, why was it not attached to the City Council resolution, and why has it not been on the City website? What is available from proponents is a dated PowerPoint presentation including a 20-page conceptual outline, with five architectural sketches, that lacks project analysis or detail. So, will this be the most Sanibel citizens have available to guide their decisions in the next 10 weeks? Are there other documents that will be available for public review, and when and where can they be found?

HOW "CONSISTENT" IS CIVIC CORE WITH THE SANIBEL PLAN

Proponents of the Civic Core have said their vision is, "to create a place consistent with the Sanibel Plan." Yet, in their promotional materials, it is never mentioned that the 26 acres the City would contribute to the project includes converting 13.5 acres of conservation land for project development. Of such land, the Sanibel Charter says: "The Environmentally Sensitive Land Conservation District, established through appropriate legislation, shall continue in existence in perpetuity, and the lands contained therein shall be kept forever wild, consistent with Sanibel's designation as a sanctuary for wildlife and for humans who wish to experience nature in its indigenous beauty and diversity, free of disruptive human activity." (Sec. 3.10.1) The Sanibel Vision Statement says: "The City of Sanibel will resist pressure to accommodate increased development and redevelopment that is inconsistent with the Sanibel Plan." The statement ends by saying that, "the community's vision of its future is hierarchy; one in which the dominant principle is Sanibel's sanctuary quality. Sanibel shall be developed as a community only to the extent to which it retains and embraces this quality of sanctuary." Given these very clear principles, citizens should ask: how "consistent" with the Sanibel Plan is cutting down and covering much of the 13.5 acres of conservation land to accommodate four new buildings, new roads, and hundreds of parking spaces for the Civic Core project?

WHY SUCH LIMITED CITIZEN PARTICIPATION?

Respect is due to the volunteers from BIG ARTS, the Center4Life, and the Sanibel Community Association who created the Civic Core proposal; but stakeholder involvement and commitment beyond this planning group seems limited. In 2014, residents from the 22-home Periwinkle Pines neighborhood, which is adjacent to the project and will be encircled by it, were denied active stakeholder status in planning. Since then, it has been reported that their association has voted to oppose it. As for the other adjacent stakeholder organizations, except for BIG ARTS, it is unclear which, if any, endorse the project.

As to citizen participation, some key questions are: if and when did citizens, beyond a small stakeholder group, have opportunities to evaluate the assumptions and need assessments that justify the project, and, to help select the best plan for the Civic Core project among alternatives? Looking ahead, the key question is if and when will Sanibel citizens have materials that describe and discuss the Civic Core project in detail and provide answers to the questions COTI has raised? This is not the time for vague promises or discussion of the Civic and Cultural Core "concept." That time has passed, and now it is time for real answers to make real decisions that will have an enormous impact on the future of Sanibel.

WHAT ABOUT THE MONEY?

The least transparent part of the Civic Core project is how little is said about capital costs, funding sources, operational costs, and lease arrangements for BIG ARTS. When the project was discussed at a public meeting in November 2013, citizens were told: "Financing will be done with every grant we can find. The costs will be borne by the grants and entities involved, not by city taxpayers." Three years later, this is no longer the case as Sanibel taxpayers are being asked to pay \$8 million plus interest for the project. It is only fair to ask: how did this come about and why is it necessary?

As to project grants, the public needs to know: who are the funders, what is the source of their income, how much does or will each provide, when has or will payments be made, and what conditions, if any, apply? Then, of course, the City should make it very clear: what are the options if only a portion of the \$12 million being sought by BIG ARTS and the \$22 million sought by the City are received?

Several deeper questions also need to be addressed: Whether and why is this the most important funding need of Sanibel at this time? Will potential funding for this project by Lee County jeopardize support for other needs in the future? And, what economic consequences may occur to the Sanibel brand, businesses, and real estate values if the project is approved?

WHO IS IN CHARGE FROM HERE?

Clearly, there are many unanswered questions about the Civic Core Project that need to be answered promptly and thoroughly. With their vote to establish a referendum, the City Council now has the challenge to provide sufficient information, including a real master plan, and answers to the questions that COTI has raised. So, from here, the City is responsible and should be judged by their thoroughness, timeliness, and fairness in providing information to citizens.

The highest level of responsibility now falls to Sanibel citizens who will be in charge as they vote on March 7. City Council members have said, citizens should and will decide; but the public right to approve declassifying conservation land is guaranteed in the City Charter, and Florida state law requires citizens to approve this type of bond issue. So, in the final analysis, Sanibel citizens must decide if the Civic Core plan is sufficiently certain, clear, compelling, and thorough to convert conservation land for development, and to tax ourselves \$8 million in so doing.

COTI invites your input on this and other issues affecting our island. Send an email to coti@coti.org. To read our past commentaries on Island issues, visit our website at www.coti.org. Or visit Committee of the Islands on Facebook.

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