

THE SANIBEL PLAN COMMUNITY WORKSHOP #2 REPORT

Public Engagement
Summary Report
June 18, 2026

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Introduction

This report presents a consolidated summary of community input gathered on June 3rd, 2026, during a structured public engagement event focused on the long-term planning priorities of Sanibel. The event was designed to capture authentic resident and stakeholder perspectives on three interconnected topic areas: Resiliency, Land Use, and Transportation. These categories reflect the core concerns shaping the island's recovery and future development trajectory, which were derived from the first community engagement workshop on February 19, 2026. In total, 40 individuals participated across 2 separate sessions that were held at 2:30 pm and 5:30 pm. An additional 22 individuals participated in two separate sessions that were held at 9:00 am for non-profit agencies and 10:30 am for those connected to the Chamber. A total of 62 individuals participated across four sessions.

Event Format and Methodology

The event utilized a facilitated group discussion format that was centered around three categories. Each group was staffed by one to two facilitators and one scribe who captured the issues identified in the group discussion. The role of the facilitator was to guide, rather than direct, the conversation. Facilitators posed a set of prepared questions related to the assigned category while creating space for participants to engage freely with one another, share personal experiences, and build upon each other's ideas.

Each discussion session lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes. This time-limited format was intentionally structured to encourage focused, high-level input rather than deep dives into specific issues. Throughout the discussion, scribes compiled participant responses, capturing both individual comments and consensus themes that emerged from the group dialogue.

A total of eight large sheets were completed with attendees issues recorded for each category, including one set from the chamber's business meeting, representing input from the various tables and participant groups in attendance. In some cases, themes appeared across multiple boards, indicating strong community alignment on issues. The input recorded on these boards forms the primary data source for this report. Responses have been synthesized and organized by discussion topic rather than presented board by board to highlight the dominant priorities expressed by the community.

It is important to note that this event format is inherently qualitative and participatory. The findings presented here are not statistically representative of the broader Sanibel population but rather reflect the range of perspectives shared by those in attendance. Taken together, this input is intended to inform ongoing planning efforts and potential incorporation into the Sanibel Plan Update and will help prioritize community values as the island continues its recovery and long-range visioning process.

Resiliency

Resiliency was a deeply felt topic given the community's recent experience with Hurricanes Ian, Helene, and Milton, and the subsequent prolonged aftermath on residents, businesses, and the community. Participants discussed resiliency as a multi-factor solution such as physical infrastructure, natural systems, energy, public health, and psychological recovery. This reflects a deep understanding that building a more resilient Sanibel requires action on many fronts simultaneously.

Flooding, Drainage, and Stormwater Management

Flooding and stormwater management dominated the resiliency discussion across nearly every group. Participants raised concerns about persistent flooding that has continued two to three years after Ian, pointing to drainage systems they consider inadequate or outdated. Key issues cited included the maintenance of swales and culverts, the function and control of weirs along the beach and Tarpon Bay. Several groups called for a comprehensive post-storm analysis to identify root causes and develop a long-term drainage improvement plan. Participants also raised concerns about "sunny day" flooding caused by king tides and stressed the need to address this through infrastructure grading and stormwater retention landscaping.

Infrastructure Hardening and Elevation

Elevating and hardening critical infrastructure were brought up as options the city could investigate. Participants specifically mentioned roads, lift stations, ferry landings, sewage pump systems, and emergency vehicle access points as infrastructure components that need to be elevated, raised, or reinforced to withstand future storm events. It was acknowledged that limited access to the island during and after emergencies highlights the importance of proactive investment in resilient infrastructure. Some participants also spoke of allowing residential structures to be elevated more easily as part of rebuilding, citing both resiliency and recovery benefits.

Energy Resilience and Power Grid Improvements

Energy resilience received substantial attention, with multiple groups calling for underground power line placement, investing in solar and renewable energy, and developing a comprehensive strategic energy plan for the island. Participants acknowledged that some power grid hardening has already been completed but stressed the importance of continuing this initiative. Potential solutions for energy resiliency were discussed, such as the implementation of microgrids island-wide, the need to elevate transformers, and ensuring that critical public facilities such as schools and emergency services are equipped with backup generators.

Nature-Based and Landscape Solutions

Several groups expressed strong interest in leveraging the island's natural assets as green infrastructure tools for resiliency. Participants mentioned mangroves, sea grapes, native vegetation, and dune systems as natural buffers against storm surge and erosion. There was discussion of how the island's preserved lands, roughly 70 percent of its total

area, could be better utilized to assist with water retention and flood mitigation. Residents also asked how they personally could contribute through resilient landscaping practices on their properties. Questions were raised about whether existing dune reinforcement efforts are achieving their intended outcomes.

Long-Term Planning and Proactive Governance

A recurring theme was that the implementation of a long-range resiliency plan addresses climate adaptation, infrastructure investment, and recovery protocols in a coordinated and proactive way. Some participants stressed that the current approach seems to have been primarily reactive and that the lessons of Ian must be implemented as forward-looking policy and standards. Better communication of city actions, public summaries of community meetings, and clearer education around the land development code and why certain regulations exist were also cited as important components of community preparedness.

Psychological and Community Resilience

Beyond physical infrastructure, participants acknowledged the psychological toll that repeated storm events have taken on residents and business owners. Some noted that people are leaving the island because they simply cannot endure another cycle of destruction and recovery. At the same time, there was a strong sense of shared community, identity and commitment among those who remain. Participants identified economic resilience such as stabilizing property values and supporting businesses through recovery as integral to sustaining the community's will to remain and invest.

Land Use

Land use was the discussion that provided the most varied comments and categories at the event, generating wide-ranging input on commercial use, housing diversity, development standards, and Sanibel's long-term identity. Participants were broadly aligned in their desire to grow the island's amenities and economic vitality while remaining protective of the natural character and low-density character that defines the city of Sanibel's "sanctuary" status.

Town Center and Mixed-Use Development

The concept of a centralized mixed-use town center emerged as one of the most widely shared ideas across the land use groups. Participants expressed enthusiasm for a walkable, pedestrian-friendly hub along the Periwinkle Way corridor, a space that would integrate retail, dining, civic uses, and community gathering in a cohesive, nature-incorporated design. Several groups described the current town center as a "pass-through" rather than a destination, and there was broad desire to change that dynamic. A "villages" concept with low-scale massing that reflects Sanibel "sanctuary" status, golf cart accessibility, event spaces, and community programming was referenced as a model worth exploring. Participants also noted that clarifying parameters around what constitutes mixed-use development would be an important first step.

Gaps in Services and Amenities

Multiple groups identified significant gaps in everyday services on the island. Commonly cited needs included urgent care facilities, an additional grocery option, pharmacy access, dry cleaning, gas stations, and a variety of small-scale "mom and pop" businesses. Participants also called for more family-oriented programming and activities, including daycare and early childhood care for newborns to 2 years old, youth activities, and a gym or sports programming. Entertainment and nightlife options were mentioned across several groups as an opportunity to restore Sanibel's pre-Ian vibrancy, with ideas ranging from a public bandshell for community concerts to a family-friendly arcade or entertainment venue. There was a recurring sentiment that the island should offer more reasons for people, especially families and younger residents, to stay and spend time beyond visiting Sanibel just for the beach.

Workforce and Affordable Housing

Workforce and affordable housing were a prominent theme, with participants acknowledging that insufficient housing options are creating real challenges for retaining workers and supporting a diverse residential population. Suggestions ranged from shared community funding between residents and businesses, to pursuing a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) as a tool to increase housing availability without broadly increasing density. Several participants noted that the island currently lacks housing diversity across income levels, age groups, and household types, including options for seniors and young families.

Redevelopment and Infill Focus

Several groups broadly favored channeling growth toward infill and redevelopment of underutilized properties. Several groups noted the prevalence of empty lots, vacant storefronts, and closed businesses as both a problem and an opportunity. Participants suggested the city reduce bureaucratic barriers to redevelopment, citing perceived long permitting timelines and overly complex approval processes as significant obstacles, particularly for small businesses seeking to rebuild after Hurricane Ian. A recurring request was for a faster, more streamlined approval process specifically for post-disaster redevelopment.

Preserving Sanibel's Character and Avoiding Overdevelopment

A strong thread running through the land use discussion was the desire to protect Sanibel's unique identity, what some participants called the "Sanibel Way." This broadly means honoring the island's legacy of environmental stewardship, where approximately 70 percent of the land is already preserved. Participants recognized that the Sanibel Plan has historically served as an effective framework for guiding responsible development and generally supported continuing in that tradition.

The central concern around overdevelopment may not have been opposition to growth but rather a desire to ensure that any new development respects the island's ecological constraints, community character and low-scale development. As discovered in Sanibel

Survey results, any form of development within Sanibel must balance itself with its 'sanctuary' value.

Incentives and Investment Climate

Some participants pointed to the need for the city to actively encourage investment rather than solely regulate it. Ideas included low-interest loan programs, expedited permitting for qualifying projects, and other financial or regulatory incentives to attract businesses and support property owners who are rebuilding. The Chamber associated group also mentioned that potentially allowing small height increases to existing buildings could help with both storm resilience and economic recovery.

Transportation

Transportation generated the most specific and solution-oriented discussion of the three categories. Participants discussed the balance between preserving Sanibel's low-speed, low-traffic character and the practical realities of seasonal congestion, workforce commuting, limited connectivity, and emergency access vulnerabilities. Input spanned cycling infrastructure, public transit, causeway management, water-based connections, and pedestrian safety. It is important to note that the City of Sanibel is concurrently working on the Transportation Master Plan, which is a long-range plan which will identify specific projects and a plan as to how the City will manage, fund, and improve its future transportation network.

Cycling and Shared-Use Path Improvements

The shared-use path system was widely praised as one of Sanibel's distinguishing assets, but participants identified several areas for improvement. Groups praised the existing shared-use path network and advocated expanding it to create increased connectivity throughout the Island. This improvement could potentially reduce vehicular traffic off main roads and increase other modes of transportation onto the shared-use path network.

Safety was one of the top concerns raised since the path becomes highly congested during peak season and the increasing use of individual motorized vehicles. The use of e-bikes on the shared-use path was an important discussion as participants raised concerns about its safety and impact on other bicyclists and pedestrians.

To alleviate these concerns, participants brainstormed potential solutions such as adding dedicated lanes for road bikes and e-bikes or installing better crossings and signage. Education programs focused on the use of e-bikes on the shared-use paths were also noted. Ancillary infrastructure such as bike repair stations and secure storage areas were also suggested. There was a consensus that cycling infrastructure is foundational to reduce car traffic and improve the island's quality of life.

Public Transit, Shuttles, and Alternative Modes

Participants expressed consistent interest in expanding public transit and alternative transportation options, though some mentioned that past trolley efforts have faced challenges. Ideas included a volunteer trolley or wave-transit system with routes to key

business and activity areas, park-and-ride lots connected to tram service for workers who commute from off-island, a free circulator shuttle (comparable to "Circuit" or "Freebie" models), a water taxi linking island destinations, and a revival of the ferry service.

Several groups also raised the possibility of a bridge or ferry connection between Pine Island and Captiva to relieve pressure on the Sanibel causeway. Accessibility and affordability were raised as core values.

Causeway, Bridge, and Access Management

The causeway and its management emerged as a significant point of interest. Participants raised concerns about the bridge's vulnerability as the island's sole access point, particularly for emergency services, and discussed the feasibility of widening the causeway or redesigning traffic flow to accommodate both inbound and outbound movement more efficiently.

Toll pricing strategies, including dynamic or surge pricing to incentivize travel outside of peak hours, were discussed as potential tools for congestion management. Several groups noted that toll exemptions or discounts for island workers who live off-island would be an equitable adjustment. Participants also acknowledged that the causeway is under county control, raising questions about how the city can effectively advocate for changes.

Golf Carts and Multimodal Coordination

Golf carts were mentioned across multiple groups, with mixed sentiment. Some participants viewed them as a desirable low-speed mobility option suited to the island's scale and character, while others expressed safety concerns about their interaction with cyclists and pedestrians on shared roads. Suggestions included designating specific golf cart pull-over areas, ensuring adequate road widths to accommodate the variety of modes in use, and clarifying regulations around where and how golf carts can operate. The broader theme was one of multimodal coordination, ensuring that bikes, pedestrians, golf carts, cars, and transit can coexist safely and efficiently.

Seasonal Traffic and Demand Management

Participants recognized that Sanibel's transportation challenges are largely seasonal, with the most acute congestion confined to a roughly nine-week period during peak tourist season. Several groups noted that year-round residents have adapted to working around these patterns, and some expressed openness to simply accepting a degree of seasonal inconvenience rather than engineering sweeping changes that could alter the island's character. Participants discussed creating on-island incentives for day-trippers to stay longer rather than departing during peak evening hours. Educating newer residents on the seasonal traffic cycle was also discussed among participants.

Emergency Access and Resilient Connectivity

Emergency access was a concern that dipped into both the transportation and resiliency categories. Participants expressed concern about situations in which the causeway bridge becomes impassable, leaving residents and emergency responders with no other alternatives. Scenarios that were brought up include storm damage, accidents in the

bridge, or infrastructure failure. These are important to highlight as they may guide discussions on potential means of access to the island.

The potential roles of barge landings, ferry service, and emergency vehicle staging were discussed. Frustrations were also raised about the hurricane pass system and its limitations during past evacuations. Participants broadly supported planning for redundant access solutions as a long-term resiliency investment.

Nonprofit and Chamber Business Meetings

Two additional meetings were held on February 19, 2026, which gathered information from business and nonprofit stakeholders. The 9:00 AM meeting captured the perspectives of nonprofit stakeholders, and the 10:30 AM meeting focused on business stakeholders. Several overlapping priorities emerged across both sessions regarding Sanibel's future development, infrastructure, and workforce. These meetings were conducted in the same format as the Sanibel Workshop, where participants discussed each topic for roughly 15-20 minutes. Notes were taken throughout to summarize what was discussed during the session.

Resiliency

Both groups recognized that guiding future development must be proactive. It was noted that this should be a multi-pronged approach. There was a focus on the reality of increased flooding events and the question of how to rebuild safely after a significant natural event. Business stakeholders advocated structural hardening, utilizing dunes and berms for drainage, studying mitigation strategies from other cities, and implementing a strategic stormwater management plan.

Land Use

The non-profit and business stakeholders both emphasized the critical link between Sanibel's land use policies and its long-term economic and social sustainability. The non-profit representatives focused on advocating affordable housing, remote work flexibility, and better pay to retain employees. The business group approached vacancy issues from a commercial standpoint, noting that 17 resort-area commercial parcels remain empty which impacts the viability of restaurants and other businesses on the island. Also, this group believed a rejuvenated Town Center is vital to fuel the local economy. Both groups identified a pressing need to support younger families through expanding recreational opportunities and entertainment. Both sessions believed establishing a cohesive vision for the remaining urban core that balances Sanibel's "conservation" value with vibrant community spaces was the priority.

Transportation

To combat traffic congestion and preserve the island's character, both stakeholder groups concluded that an alternative, multi-modal transit system was necessary. There was a focus on exploring a trolley system to move people efficiently and alleviate the vehicle

burden on local roads. Suggestions were provided, including road medians, park-and-ride lot expansions to encourage cycling, and alternative bridge traffic.

Conclusion

The findings from this event are intended to serve as a qualitative foundation for ongoing planning conversations. Input gathered through this public engagement event reflects a community that is thoughtful, engaged, and deeply invested in the future of Sanibel. Across all three topic areas, Resiliency, Land Use, and Transportation, participants demonstrated both a clear-eyed recognition of the challenges the island faces and forward innovative method to overcome them. Several overarching themes cut across all categories:

- The importance of preserving Sanibel's environmental and cultural identity even as it rebuilds.
- The need for long-range, proactive planning rather than reactive responses.
- The value of making the island accessible, livable, and economically viable for a diverse mix of residents, workers, and visitors.