



City of Sanibel

City Council Public Comment Card

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Sanibel City Council Town Hall Workshop Feb. 15, 2022

Darla Letourneau comments submitted for the record on Feb. 14, 2022

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Input for Council's Long Range Planning for the City

Area 2: COMMUNITY—Focus on Quality of Life

As the City Council undertakes its long range planning process next month, I'd like to suggest that the City's Strategic Plan be organized with a **focus on quality of life**.

Quality of Life has application to each of the three areas you've identified—environment, community, and infrastructure. While the Sanibel Vision focuses on preserving our small town character and protecting the environment, we need a commiserate focus on the social well being of the island residents in order to sustain the values in our Sanibel Vision Statement and incorporated in the Sanibel Plan.

Many of us chose to come to Sanibel because of the quality of life here. Citizens look to their local government to protect and enhance the quality of life factors that are important to them and that bind them to this community.

Many of the quality of life priorities we value are embedded in the Sanibel vision [e.g., the small town character of our community and its commitment to living in harmony with one another and with nature; strong controls to limit growth and development]. Other complimenting and important quality of life elements are not explicitly enumerated [e.g., A community that promotes an active lifestyle through its biking and walking infrastructure, its recreational facilities, nature preserves, and parks.]

The norm nationwide is for local governments to make "quality of life" either an overarching organizing principle of its strategic plan or one of its priority goals. *[See graphic on p.34]* Sanibel's government has no such focus on quality of life issues.

While the Sanibel Vision Statement reflects the community's shared values and goals, the City's Strategic Plan needs to focus on the governmental systems and tools to help us more effectively implement the community's vision.

This isn't an "either/or" between the environment and the quality of life of its citizens. It's just the opposite. You need to have an engaged and happy citizenry if we are to work together to preserve our small town character and protect our sanctuary island. Not only can we have both, we NEED both in order to succeed.

COVID-19 Wake-up Call

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the antiquated and/or non-existent Sanibel's City Government systems and digital infrastructure that made it difficult to provide city services during the long shutdown. Even 2 years later, the City is still struggling to restart services, and is ill-equipped to deal with the backlogs created by the long immobilization of government operations.

The pandemic also exposed the price citizens are paying for a city government that lacks the key ingredients for citizen engagement: Transparency, accessibility, and accountability. Innovative and exciting public engagement tools have been part of local government ecosystems for at least the past decade. This is what innovative communities are doing and the best practices are out there for the taking. Unfortunately, Sanibel's lack of the use of technology has meant that these tools for citizen engagement have not been available to us. Moving into the 21st Century with the use of available technology tools will be a win/win/win for all parties, AND save the taxpayers' money. *[See Attachment 1: Assessment of Sanibel's existing "systems" and how it got this way.]*

Citizens expect their local government to operate efficiently and in a cost-effective manner. Over the past two years, citizens have raised the bar on their expectations of local governments. They now expect them to provide the same level of customer service they receive from leading private companies (e.g. Amazon)—increasing the importance on making it easier, faster, and cheaper—a trend that only accelerated during the pandemic. Against these higher expectations, Sanibel's lack of online customer service is even more glaring.

Finally, these investments are important if we want to attract younger families and new remote workers who can do their jobs from anywhere. Sanibel has to provide better technology services—from faster internet service and stronger cell reception to having robust online city services. We have a sophisticated citizenry and they have high expectations.

The City can't move forward without building a top-notch digital platform and integrated governmental systems from the ground up, and building the tools for citizen engagement—transparency, accessibility, and accountability—into the fabric of its digital infrastructure.

Without this platform, we will continue to operate in the 20th century, with silos, operating piecemeal, band-aids...all of which is hindering Sanibel's ability to maintain and enhance our quality of life. Ever increasingly sophisticated technology is a fact of life and it provides the essential tools to get us where we want to go, so we must invest. Fundamentally, these investments are essential to our ability as a community protect the Sanibel Vision and our Sanibel Plan.

Sanibel was not alone in being ill-equipped when the pandemic hit. Many local governments lacked adequate online systems to deliver services to constituents, to communicate effectively

with citizens, to provide mechanisms for civic engagement, collect valuable data, and allow city employees to effectively work remotely and continue important government services.

However, by the summer of 2020, many local governments had turned their attention to making technology updates so they could provide constituent services during the pandemic. Unfortunately, Sanibel didn't, or couldn't both because of its lack of a customer service mentality and its lack of a functioning digital platform upon which these online systems could be built. The City's attempt to quickly create an online permitting system, slapping it onto an antiquated "digital" platform, was an *abject failure*. [See Attachment 2 : Broken Permitting System: Case Study in problem and threat it poses to quality of life and Sanibel Plan and Vision.] The Rec Center is the poster child of the City's lack of a customer service focus.

The lack of basic information about city business as well as the inability to transact any city business online not only hampers citizen engagement, it makes city operations very inefficient. To find any information, track down the status of a project, complete a form, pay a bill, etc. requires repeated phone calls and emails, and repeated in-person visits to submit paperwork. All this wastes staff time, as well as frustrates citizens.

Given COVID, citizens want ways to do business that don't require in-person services. We should be able to do all city business online, from getting annual beach parking passes, dog licenses, hurricane passes, rec center membership, signing up and paying for classes or services, reserving rec center room, etc. Out of necessity, most businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies have figured out how to have online services, and our City needs to do the same.

Closing

I want a City government that is transparent, accessible, and accountable. By making quality of life an organizing principle of the city's strategic plan, I believe it can be a useful tool in identifying specific goals and outcome measures needed for better government. We need to build a city government infrastructure, systems, and staff that can serve our citizens, address pressing needs, and function effectively and efficiently to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow. These goals, objectives and outcome measures can then form the basis of an online "Dashboard" reporting system that allows citizens to know how the City is delivering on its commitments on a real time basis.

I would also like to see the Council consider the strategic plan not exclusively a City Government plan, but as the framework for a community-wide plan. The successful model of the SCCF/City/other stakeholders' collaborative partnership for Water Quality could serve as a template for collaborative approaches in other areas . [See Attachment 3: A Community-wide strategic plan, using collaborative/public-private partnership model.]

The City's most urgent need is to invest in building a comprehensive, holistic, integrated and unified digital platform.* It may not be sexy but it is the foundation for all the government improvements needed to facilitate the efforts of both city government and its citizens—from

transparency, accessibility, accountability, online customer service, and better service delivery systems.

The future is likely to be even more challenging than the past, with growing threats to the preservation of the small town character of our community and to the protection of our sanctuary island. To succeed, our City Government, along with its citizens, and all the island stakeholders and partners, need to be equipped with the best government systems, using the most sophisticated technology tools, and employing cutting edge collaborative strategies to meet these challenges. **We must step up our game...**our community's future depends on it!

Finally, as you listen to citizen comments tonight, ask yourself: does that comment deal with quality of life expectations; with customer expectations of their government? Maybe that will be an indicator of whether a quality of life organizing principle could be helpful in framing the City's 10-year Strategic Plan.

THANK YOU!



Source: Department of Finance Canada.

***Financing for Digital Infrastructure**

Sanibel has a once-in-a-lifetime source of funds to invest in a top-notch Digital Platform: \$3.7 M of one-time ARPA federal funds (American Rescue Plan) has been allocated to the City to be used to replace lost fiscal revenue and government services (during pandemic) AND for investments in “public sector capacity”. These funds are available to the city between now and 2024 (with final expenditure not required until 2026). The Jan. 4, 2022 final Treasury Department guidance makes clear that these funds can be used for capacity building to support technology infrastructure to adapt government operations so that they are better prepared in the future to serve their citizens when the next pandemic-type crisis hits.

Attachment 1: What are Sanibel's existing "systems" and how did they get this way?

The City "systems" are inefficient paper processes and decade's old single-use server based technology, which became a glaring liability during COVID. The City hasn't advanced its use of technology in 20 years and it appears to have been intentional. The same is true with the lack of transparency. With no recognition of city government's responsibility to deliver efficient and effective services to its citizens, there has never been a focus on customer service.

How did this happen?

I've lived on Sanibel for 21 years+ and have been an engaged citizen since arriving at the end of 2000. Over the past 2 years, I've been asking myself the question: How did this happen? Why haven't we focused on these glaring shortcomings? **Here is my assessment:**

- Somehow the concept of "Keep Sanibel Sanibel" got translated into "we want to stay just the way we are", "no change"...a frozen time capsule of Mayberry, with our quaint paper processes and disdain for technology.
- The City's attitude, and yes, arrogance, played a role:
 - "We're unique and special and no one is like us so best practices and innovations don't apply to us. We have nothing to learn from other cities or organizations. "
 - "We're just going to keep on doing what we're doing in the way we've always done it."
 - We're going to continue to keep our head in the sand and just focus on our island."
- City government's message to citizens:
 - "You came to Sanibel and it's a unique and special place that we the government are responsible for protecting. We have lots of rules and you have to get our approval to do what you want to do, so you're at our mercy. You chose to move here and that was part of the bargain. So, if you want something from the city, wait in line. We'll get to you when we get to you..Don't call us, we'll call you...we're busy with other priorities. "
- In the meantime, our government is not transparent, accessible or accountable to the public so we have no way of knowing what's going on. It took COVID-19 to make many of us aware of how broken our city government was. Citizens have to look no further than the City's website for proof. [If awards were handed out for the worst government website in Florida, we would be a prize winner. It is so outdated that the prompt for signing up for the City's email list asks the question of whether you are using dial-up or broadband internet service!]

Attachment 2: Broken Permitting System: Case Study in problem and threat it poses to quality of life and Sanibel Plan and Vision

- Given the importance of our land development codes (LDCs) to the Sanibel Plan and the need for adequate review of permitting request to ensure that they are in compliance with the LDCs, the City had a duty to make the permitting process as streamlined, efficient, and transparent as humanly possible, using all the technology tools available to continuously improve the permitting processes.
- Unfortunately, the City's permit processes are the antithesis of this.
 - This lack of processing of permits is creating high level citizen frustration and negative economic impacts, and can undermine the Sanibel Plan if new residents see the Plan as reason why can't get permit to renovate house, etc.
 - To protect our environment and land use plan, our City needs a state-of-the-art, efficient and transparent and customer-friendly permitting system so that the additional requirements that ensure compliance with the Sanibel Plan aren't seen as the cause of the hold up in permits when in fact it's the City's outdated and inefficient permitting process that is the cause of delays.
 - Not only did the City lack the digital infrastructure to have an effective online permitting process, it lacked qualified & trained staff to run the system.
 - The City faces an immediate crisis in dealing with the growing backlog of permits that have built up during the past 2 years. It needs to find ways to expedite the process of working down the backlog without compromising the Sanibel Plan, and to get a new system functioning and available as soon as possible.
 - The permitting crisis is also another example of the price we pay for the lack of transparency, accessibility, and accountability in our city government. Without these tools for citizen engagement, the public has been slow to realize the scale of the crisis.
 - It also highlights another reason many citizens remain unaware: the lack of real newspapers that report on what's happening in our community. Like many "tourist towns", there is an unspoken rule—our weekly "papers" are just supposed to be "happy news", so city government issues and other community crises never hit the papers...they are only whispered about in the various community circles in town.
 - In communities that still have media reporting the news, the permitting crisis in Sanibel would have been headline news long ago.

Attachment 3: A Community-wide strategic plan, using collaborative/public-private partnership model

Council should consider its Strategic Plan as not only the City government's plan but as the framework for a community-wide plan. As we've learned over the past decade or so, a collaborative/public-private partnership model can help our small community have a larger voice on important regional and state issues impacting Sanibel.

When the Sanibel Vision and Sanibel Plan were written in 1974-6, we thought that we only had to focus on the island—that we could control our destiny. Thus, at the beginning, Sanibel had a very insular approach. By 2005-6, when the first major water quality disaster hit (blue green algae washing up on our beaches), it was clear that regional and state action was needed to protect the island's water quality. Gradually, Sanibel began to see that it needed to reach beyond its boundaries and form regional and state partnerships in order to protect our island, but the old insular thinking is still holding us back on many fronts.

With all the challenges facing local governments today, it is clear that sustainability and resiliency are a function of all city departments, elected officials, AND external stakeholders. Thus, there is a need to form a cooperative "ecosystem" in which mutually reinforcing government and private sector activities contribute to our community. We maximize our available resources by building teamwork capacity and through effective government processes.

Sanibel has a very effective model of this approach—the collaborative public/private partnership on water quality and other environmental issues, co-led by SCCF and the City. The City's partnership with SCCF and other community partners—Chamber of Commerce, Captains for Clean Water, the Calusa Water- keeper, the Conservancy of SWFL—has demonstrated the power of this approach. While the City hasn't invested in technology tools, SCCF has. It is a world-class nonprofit at the cutting edge of how to use all the tools available in sophisticated ways to work collaboratively towards a common goal.

We need to take this successful approach and begin to use it on other challenges facing the community. For example, why not use this collaborative approach to work smarter to meet the needs of island seniors? There are multiple nonprofits/other agencies/stakeholders (library, faith-based organizations) as well as the City that are providing services to island seniors. Why not take a collaborative community-wide look at the recent FISH needs assessment survey of older adults in our community. Collectively, the stakeholders could figure out how to maximize the available resources in meeting these community needs in the most efficient and cost-effective way with teamwork, making sure the gaps are addressed, and eliminating duplication of effort and competition so we can, as a community, maximize the community's resources to meet our common goal.

The increasing number of threats to home rule (from State Legislature) means that collaboration and partnerships will be even more critical going forward. Every year Sanibel government is losing more and more of its home rule “tools” that allow us to protect and preserve our Sanibel Plan.

For example, one of the biggest threats to the small town character of our community is the State Legislature’s efforts over the past 5 + years to take away local governments’ ability to regulate short-term rentals. If this push (driven by Airbnb and VRBO) succeeds, the character of our island could fundamentally change in one season—going from a community of residential neighborhoods to an island with tourists in every neighborhood, destroying the social fabric of our community.

Sanibel’s small town character and environment also face ongoing challenges from the Lee County government—from their approval of developments on sensitive environmental lands just across the bridge that directly impact the island’s surrounding ecosystem; to the County’s planned redevelopment of the Causeway islands.

Darla Letourneau TALKING POINTS

Sanibel City Council Town Hall Workshop Feb. 15, 2022

Area 2: COMMUNITY—Focus on Quality of Life

- As a preface to my comments tonight, I want to say that I am excited about the City's leadership team—this Council and City Manager Souza.
- We've never had such a capable and hard working team that is committed to serving the people of this community and making our government the best it can be to meet the challenges ahead.
- This Town Hall meeting is the beginning of what I hope will be a new level of citizen engagement in our government.
- As Council prepares to develop a long range Strategic Plan for the City, I'd like to suggest that the Plan be organized with a **focus on quality of life**.
 - I submitted a detailed paper and want to highlight a few key points.
- Quality of Life has application to each of the three areas you've identified—environment, community, and infrastructure.
- While the Sanibel Vision focuses on preserving our small town character and protecting the environment, we need a commensurate focus on the social well being of the island residents.
- The City's Strategic Plan needs to focus on the governmental systems and tools to help us more effectively implement the community's vision.
- This isn't an "either/or" between the environment and the quality of life of its citizens. Not only can we have both, we NEED both in order to succeed.
- **COVID-19 was a big wake-up call for us:** It exposed how outdated our governmental systems are-- designed for 20th century, not the 21st.
- Our "systems" are inefficient paper processes, with no investment to make service delivery efficient and effective.

- *Consequence: our permit processing disaster*
- The City hasn't advanced its use of technology in 20 years-- We have a decade's old single-use server based technology.
- The City's website, which should have served as a primary tool for citizen engagement during the pandemic, exposed the City's lack of transparency, accessibility, and accountability.
- During the past 2 years, citizens have raised their expectations for government customer service based on their private sector experience (think Amazon),
 - Against these higher expectations, Sanibel's lack of online customer service is even more glaring.
- **The City's most urgent need is to invest in building a comprehensive and integrated digital platform.**
- That's the foundation upon which to build better service delivery systems and provide online customer service.
- The tools for citizen engagement—transparency, accessibility, and accountability—must be built into the fabric of its digital infrastructure.
- A modern, well run City is also important to having a top-notch workforce. —it attracts and retains talent, while also inspiring further innovations.
- **We must step up our game...**our community's future depends on it!
- A **quality of life organizing approach** can be a useful tool in identifying specific goals and outcome measures needed for better government.
- Our City leadership team is already beginning to take action to improve government operations. First up—a **City website makeover**, which will be unveiled soon!

Thank you!