SAVING SANIBEL

A visionary plan has long safeguarded the island's character and beauty. But can it inspire solutions for a changing climate?

By Thomas T. Ankersen

In October 2022, Hurricane Ian devastated Southwest Florida, including Sanibel Island, a popular vacation destination known for its low-key charm and natural beauty. On Sanibel, a 12-foot storm surge and 130 mph winds destroyed buildings, crumpled the only bridge to the island and tossed around homes, boats and debris like confetti. The saltwater storm surge also flooded interior freshwater wetlands, killing fish and vegetation.

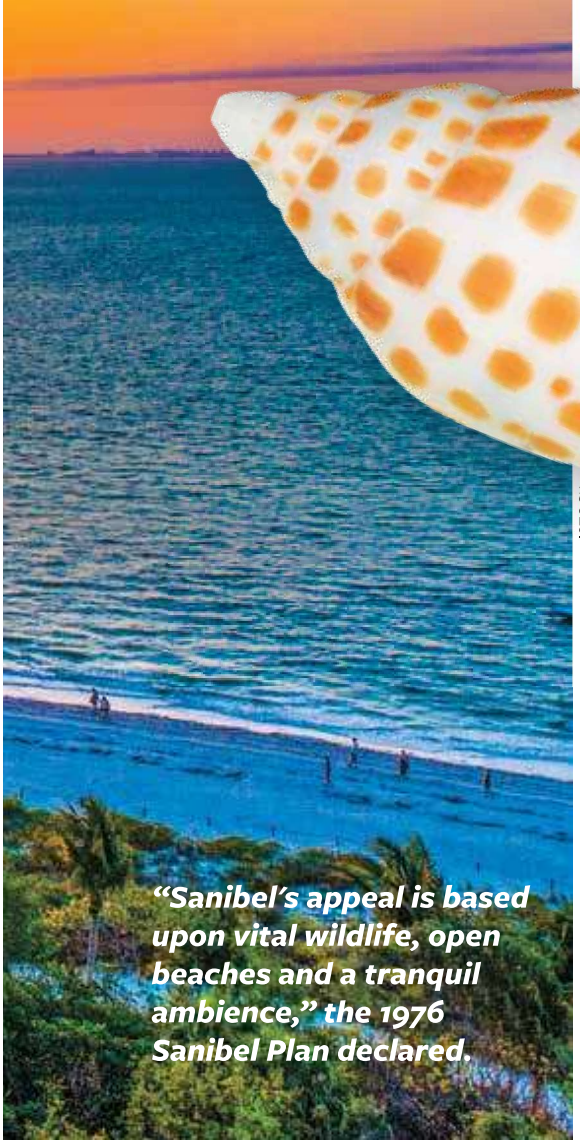
ALAMY STOCK

Hurricane Ian broke up the Sanibel Causeway and damaged structures throughout the island.

The destruction throughout Southwest Florida was horrendous, yet on Sanibel it could have been worse. A visionary 1976 land-use plan limited development to a third of the island while protecting many of the areas most vulnerable to storms. And as the island crawls back to life, its environmentally conscious plan is providing a framework for its recovery. Still, with a warming climate fueling more powerful storms and rising seas, Sanibel residents, like their counterparts in coastal areas throughout Florida and the world, are confronting difficult, even existential questions. Created nearly 50 years ago, the Sanibel Plan, considered one of the most influential local government planning documents in American history, may have been written for this moment.

Blessed with sea, sand and world-famous shelling, Sanibel Island has long attracted those who cherish its beauty and tranquility. Inspired by Sanibel and her sister island, Captiva, Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote in her famous 1955 book, *A Gift from the Sea*, that their natural treasures helped her find self-realization.

Reached only by ferry for most of the 20th century, the remote island was a haven for such visitors as Pulitzer Prize-winning political cartoonist J.M. "Ding Darling," who worked to establish a 6,300-acre wildlife refuge there in 1945, and famed poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. By the 1960s, about 2,000 people lived on Sanibel.



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"Sanibel's appeal is based upon vital wildlife, open beaches and a tranquil ambience," the 1976 Sanibel Plan declared.

But in 1963, the sleepy little community was jolted with the construction of a causeway, making access to the island fast and easy. Developers began planning to line Sanibel's pristine shores with high rises and condominiums.

A few years earlier, Sanibel residents, bracing for the impact of the causeway, had persuaded the state to create the Sanibel Planning and Zoning Authority, an independent special district with the power to zone and set density.

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The Yankee Clipper ferry to Sanibel in 1957. In 1963, a new causeway opened the island to growth.

But a court struck down the authority, leaving development decisions once again at the mercy of the pro-growth Lee County Commission. In 1968, county planners recommended Sanibel for high-intensity urban development and a four-lane expressway. The county's zoning would have allowed 30,000 residential units on the island, resulting in an estimated population of 90,000.

These were heady times for Florida developers and elected officials who shared their exuberance. Some had even proposed a "Mangrove Highway," designed to connect the barrier islands from Naples to Charlotte Harbor with a roadway elevated about the islands with off ramps along the way.

Sanibel residents saw their fears come true as trips across the new causeway skyrocketed. In 1974, they banded together to begin the "Sanibel Rebellion." Among the leaders was Porter Goss, a former CIA agent who would later become a U.S. Congressman and director of the CIA.

Porter Goss helped lead the "Sanibel Rebellion" in the early 1970s.

After Goss retired to Sanibel in his 40s, he and two former CIA colleagues living on the island started the Island Reporter newspaper in 1973. The newspaper became a powerful voice for residents. After an editorial proposed creating a new city with independent, home-rule authority, the citizens sought and received legislative authorization to pursue incorporation, which was followed by an overwhelmingly favorable referendum. Goss was elected mayor of the new city.

Along with its extraordinary beauty, says Goss, Sanibel had another defining characteristic: "an exceptional cadre of people," from fishermen to successful retirees, who were united in their desire to control their own destiny. Indeed, when a bank decided a promised loan to underwrite the new city's first year was too risky and instead issued notes that individual residents could subscribe to, people rushed to sign up. "The notes were oversubscribed in the first two days," Goss says.

The preamble to Sanibel's incorporation statute set the tone for the new city, describing "an island community known far and wide for its unique atmosphere and unusual natural environment" and vowing "to ensure compliance with such planning so that these unique natural characteristics shall be preserved."

On Nov. 5, 1974, Sanibel became the second community in Florida to incorporate under the new 1973 Municipal Home Rule statute. The new City Council immediately imposed a moratorium on new construction and began the process of creating a comprehensive plan.

Government by Nature

The residents of Sanibel were determined to protect not only their tranquil lifestyle but also the natural environment. Uniquely among Florida's developed barrier island communities, the Sanibel Plan makes ecology the central consideration in all its policies and decisions.

In clear, readable and sometimes lyrical language, the plan makes its guiding principles plain: "Sanibel is and shall remain a barrier island sanctuary, one in which a diverse population lives in harmony with the island's wildlife and natural habitats. The Sanibel community must be vigilant in the protection and enhancement of its sanctuary characteristics." Moreover, it issues a powerful rebuttal to those who insisted the island would suffer economic ruin by opposing unbridled growth. "Sanibel's economic fortune is directly related to the viability of its natural systems," the plan declares. "Sanibel's appeal as a pleasant place to live or visit is based upon vital wildlife, open beaches and a tranquil ambience...

Sanibel is and shall remain a small-town community whose members choose to live in harmony with one another and with nature."

Following these principles, Sanibel went on to enact restrictions that prohibited or severely restricted development in ecologically vulnerable areas—more than two-thirds of the island—and limited structures to four stories in height.

The Quiet Revolution

The Sanibel Plan was not the singular creation of one quirky community. It was designed by a group of extraordinary leaders in what has been called the "Quiet Revolution in Land-Use Control." In the late 1960s and early 1970s, some urban planners and land-use lawyers began reconsidering traditional development. Informed by rising environmental awareness and scientific data, they envisioned controlled growth that preserved communities' natural assets and characters. This Quiet Revolution did not receive the popular attention given to the eras' landmark laws—the Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act and Endangered Species Act. Yet inappropriate land use helped pave the way for the ills those acts addressed.

Well-connected and forward-thinking, Sanibel's leaders were determined to tap into cutting-edge expertise to create a top-quality plan for the new city. They invited renowned experts at the forefront of the Quiet Revolution to help create a model for nature-based barrier island development.

Sanibel may have been small and remote, but those experts were intrigued. Here was a chance to field-test their theories on a mostly undeveloped community with some of the most beautiful natural assets in the United States.

The dream team that signed on included the planning firm Wallace, McHarg, Roberts & Todd, headed by Scottish landscape architect Ian McHarg and architect/planner David Wallace. McHarg authored the game-changing planning bible *Design with Nature*, a finalist for the National Book Award in 1971 and still a staple of planners' bookshelves. McHarg has been called the father of modern computer-based Geographic Information Systems. The system allows planners to layer spatial data sets—topography, soils, water resources, vegetation—on top of each other to inform decisions. McHarg pioneered this approach, which his firm applied to Sanibel without the aid of modern computational power.

The city also retained Chicago law professor and land-use attorney Fred Bosselman to help draft the Sanibel Plan's language and ensure it would be legally defensible. In 1971, Bosselman wrote the influential report that gave the Quiet Revolution its name for the White House Council on Environmental Quality. At a time when many local communities were permitting unchecked development, Bosselman argued for having states set overarching land-use policy, based on developments' effects on their community and the larger region and consideration of infrastructure, quality of life and environmental preservation. Bosselman's Model Land Development Code formed the basis for new land-use legislation in states across the country, including Florida.

Finally, through its nongovernmental partner, the Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation, the new city reached out to The Conservation Foundation in Washington, D.C., to help compile scientific data about Sanibel's environment and wildlife. William K. Reilly, head of the Conservation Foundation and later the administrator of the EPA, noted, "The Conservation Foundation undertook its Sanibel work not only to help the citizens of Sanibel protect their natural systems, but also in an effort to improve the methodology of conservation."

For nearly two years this distinguished triumvirate worked with Sanibel officials to craft the Sanibel Report, which documented the island's natural resources, established a zoning framework and set the island's residential development capacity.

Sanibel was divided into six ecological zones (Gulf beach, Gulf beach ridge, interior wetlands, mid-island ridges, mangroves, bay beach) with management guidelines and development regulations for each. The city settled on a maximum of some 8,000 residential dwelling units, with density based on the ecological carrying capacity of each zone. Hurricane evacuation played a key role in setting an upper limit on density. On July 19, 1976, the City adopted the Sanibel Plan and lifted the building moratorium.

When work on the plan began, Florida did not require local governments to develop comprehensive plans, nor were such plans subject to state and regional oversight. That changed in 1975, when Florida enacted the Local Government Comprehensive Planning Act, enshrining Bosselman's Quiet Revolution into law. The City of Sanibel was among the first to submit its plan for state approval.

When Bosselman died in 2013, University of Houston law professor Gilbert Finnell wrote an essay praising the Sanibel Plan as a "planner's dream," and "the product of a rare combination of scientific, planning and legal talent." Craig A. Peterson from the John Marshall Law School in Chicago

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Sanibel hosts abundant wildlife, including nesting great blue herons.

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An aerial view of 12-mile-long Sanibel Island.

opined that it was "the leading example of applying scientific methodologies to complex, tourism-driven land use problems." Wayne Daltry, longtime leader of the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council, said, "Sanibel changed the nature of municipal planning within Florida when it made the island's sensitive ecology the basis of its plan." In 2007, the American Planning Association named the Sanibel Plan a "National Planning Landmark," a prestigious designation awarded to projects "that are historically significant, initiated a new direction in planning or impacted American planning, cities or regions over a broad range of time and space."

At first, developers would sue the city when projects that violated the plan were rejected. Goss has quipped that as mayor, he became so familiar with the process server that he and his wife would offer him a sandwich and a beer when he arrived at their house with the latest set of legal papers. But the plan prevailed, and Sanibel preserved its character as it grew into a world-famous vacation destination.

After the Storm

The Sanibel Plan has been revised and updated several times, and, especially after Hurricane Ian, it's likely it will be again. But the problems the island now faces defy easy solutions. Traffic gridlock, invasive species, algae blooms, and most of all, rising seas and increased storminess—these are what planners call "wicked" problems, complex and interdependent.

Resiliency—the capacity of systems to adapt to ongoing stress and withstand severe shocks—has become the conservation and development policy watchword du jour. The State of Florida has embraced the term and is pouring billions of dollars into preparing for the uncertain climate future, particularly along the coast. Insurance companies and planners are sounding the alarm, with some urging retreat from vulnerable coastal areas rather than rebuilding.

With most of its land set aside for conservation, Sanibel is already more resilient than most developed barrier islands, simply because there is less to destroy and rebuild. And although Sanibel pursues nature-based solutions to address rising seas and flooding, discouraging sea walls while encouraging "living shorelines" and storm-resistant native vegetation, the magnitude of Hurricane Ian mocked these efforts.

Yet residents—including Goss, now 83, who had to flee from Ian so quickly he left his computer on—are determined to rebuild and adapt. Many of the low-slung homes and historic cottages that provided so much of Sanibel's charm were destroyed and will have to be replaced by bigger, stronger, higher structures to meet FEMA and state building standards. But the sea, the beaches and the wildlife will still be woven into the blissful fabric of everyday island life. And the Sanibel Plan, which has been so successful for so long, offers hope and inspiration as citizens seek new solutions to safeguard their future.

Climate change involves a host of off-island forces, Goss concedes, and it requires something difficult to establish these days: "adult, healthy, working relationships with the county, state and federal government." But Sanibel can prevail, he insists: "We have good, transparent, nonpolitical government. We know our community and have the resources to deal with challenges. The mood is totally optimistic." ■

Thomas T. Ankersen serves as the inaugural Pfeifer Conservation Fellow for the Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation, which provided support for research for this story. He is a Professor Emeritus at the University of Florida Levin College of Law, where he directed its Conservation Clinic, and Director Emeritus of the Coastal Policy Lab at UF's Center for Coastal Solutions and the Florida Sea Grant Legal Program. In addition to a law degree from the University of Florida, Ankersen holds a master's degree in history from the University of South Florida.