

KeyOpinion



Longboat's New High Priest of PIC and Planning

By Steve Reid
Editor & Publisher

Freud said conflict is identity. And the identity of Longboat Key was forged in the crucible of many political battles with strong-willed personages fighting to form an island reflecting their image of an idyllic paradise. Now Longboat's very essence is under assault.

The irony is this assault is coming from within. The very organization that struggled to preserve Longboat's tranquility and beauty has spawned a handful of members and a defiant attitude that stands axiomatic to the original vision of its founders two decades ago. That organization is the Public Interest Committee. And the primary purveyor of the new ideology is Planning and Zoning Chairman Sandy Gilbert. And although no longer president of PIC, he remains its de facto "voice" and leader. But how is Gilbert hammering at many long-held precepts of PIC and Town policy?

Eight Days a Week

Let's start with the issue of tourism. For years, PIC drove Town Hall's agenda. It influenced the dialogue on commercial activity and tourism. For instance, the 30-day rule that governs the length of time tourists can stay in a rental unit was a hallmark of the group's effort to keep the island a quiet, tranquil and serene residential experience. The idea of a parade of families and visitors was something PIC and Town leaders abhorred as much as red tide.

But how times have changed. Now Gilbert and the planning and zoning board have gone full circle. Gilbert is pushing to loosen and ease many of the restrictions and regulations that govern business. He has spoken in favor of quickly reducing the 30-day rule, desiring to allow even weekend stays.

As one Town commissioner says: "If you want to see class warfare on Longboat Key, try reducing the 30-day rule. What that means is the possibility of 52 differing sets of neighbors next to your home in one year. That is not the community these residents bought into and invested their money and heart and future

in." Longboaters don't want different families yelling at their kids each week."

And that's obviously true. This is the island that demands a shoot-to-kill ordinance for jet skiers who whisk along the Gulf shoreline. But to Gilbert, this tectonic plate shift in policy would provide a much-needed remedy to compensate for the loss of tourists due to the conversion of Gulf-front hotels to condominiums.



The PIC Party

Yet to many of PIC's current members, the organization is losing its purpose as a government watchdog and is becoming an advocacy group, if not a thinly veiled political party. And these are long-standing members complaining. Many say they fear speaking against the powerful position and sometimes-belligerent attitude Gilbert has assumed.

One of the actions that has shown Gilbert to be less of an open-minded thinker considering options, and more of a man executing an agenda, is the letter he wrote to fellow board members and commissioners following a meeting he orchestrated with the Longboat Chamber of Commerce. The meeting did bring together some of the finest business people expressing their desires as to what the Town should do to help their financial stake on the island. Gilbert, though, assumed a position of advocacy in assembling such a strong group and subsequently took it upon himself to distill the opinions or sentiments of the business leaders. Gilbert wrote his desire to fast track an experimental relaxing of the 30-day rental rule. In fact, he wishes to have it placed on the Commission agenda at the earliest possible date. Like a snake biting its own tail, Gilbert took a position in complete opposition to the historical position of his other organization, PIC.

PIC has always maintained that the Town Commission and Town leaders refuse to take action on any significant departure from policy during the off season when the majority of residents are gone and cannot debate nor dissent. By fast-tracking his desire to relax the 30-day rule, Gilbert is subverting the opportunity for discussion most property owners would enjoy in this matter, which has been one of long-standing and intense debate

for many years.

This desire on Gilbert's part to relax the 30-day rule dovetails with the visioning process of which he is the unofficial author.

The Town visioning process, unlike King Lear's dementia, is not a matter of the blind wandering a bleak landscape in search of direction. Increasingly, the visioning process seems less a process of determining in an open-minded manner what residents want, feel and desire for the future of our island, and more a corralling, a cajoling and a methodology to come to conclusions that a handful of behind-the-scenes players want to see manifest.

In short, I predict the end result will be an assault on the Town Charter and its limitation on density. I believe that some members of the Town planning board, past and present, have an agenda to prove that the density limitation, which allows no increase in residential units over the standard set in 1984, be lifted. They will argue that that is the only way to solve the commercial dilemma. PIC fought in the 1980s to restrict density through a vote the majority of Longboaters supported.

Here are a few signs of why the visioning process has turned more into a dank tunnel. It was a blatant error on the side of the Town to hold its first visioning meeting at the annual meeting of PIC in February. PIC directors have very definite political aims and opinions regarding the island, and it amounts to asking the choir as to what should be in the liturgy. Gilbert most recently served as PIC's high priest before his most recent incarnation as Planning and Zoning Board chairman.

Longboat's DNA

So it may come as no surprise that the outcome of the Visioning Plan and what is already being bandied about as the 'objective desires of residents' mirrors an a priori agenda. It is like basic biology, the interplay of genetics and environment. And it turns out the Town's DNA is being lifted directly from the directors of the visioning plan, and the environment influencing the plan is shaped by the very Board employing the consultant.

And one can see where this is going to lead. If Gilbert has his way, an additional \$25,000 will be spent mailing a survey of about 25 questions asking residents their opinion on the issues that have been already determined. Then this information will be collected, collated, charted and graphed into recommendations that the Commission can use in addressing the so-called urgent issues. It will be treated as an unofficial referendum to making policy. It would be preferable to have our Town leaders act like a pillar in a strong structure - take a position on their own that can hold some weight and do not try to assemble a thousand hands to collectively bear the burden through a survey.

Follow Up to Chamber Meeting

The following is my take on what we heard yesterday in our session with the Chamber of Commerce.

The need to revitalize tourism on the Key was the overriding theme from the Chamber participants. The loss of the Holiday Inn and other hotel/motel properties has dramatically hurt business. Add the rising cost of property taxes, insurance, labor and cost of goods and they feel the long term prospects for business on the Key is not good without a revitalized tourism market.

Looking at specific suggestions on how to improve the commercial outlook, I have grouped them below into three different time frames from relatively easy short-term fixes to long-term excursions requiring the passing of a referendum:

Short-term Remedies

- Relax 30 day minimum stay to one week for an off-season trial period in 2006 and 2007.
- Parking Regs (Examine)
- On-street parking availability on Broadway
- Chiles' adjacent parking feasibility
- Verify status of boat slips and bicycle racks at applicable restaurants
- Respond accordingly to Chamber's decision on the need for an Economic Development Council

Medium Range Objectives

- Bus/Trolley hybrid transportation service to link LBK

to Bradenton Beach and St. Armands Circle

- Explore better execution of fences and other barriers between commercial properties
- Marketing campaign by Chamber to bolster more on-island trade
- Education Outreach Program to persuade the public to support P&Z and Commission recommendations.

Long-Range Strategies

- Create Tourism Zones where hotel/motels can use lost density from former properties to rebuild their facilities to meet FEMA and other current codes.
- Introduce mixed use with the option for a tourism overlay (Bed & Breakfast)
- Get Commission help to press county and state legislatures to be more helpful in lowering property tax rates for businesses.

This is essentially what I heard. Please feel free to add things I might have missed or rephrase statements I have made. Once I have your agreement on the list, I'll forward it to Gail for distribution to the Chamber members. I also like David Brenner's suggestion that we move right away to set in motion the short-term items. Again, with your agreement, we can get the 30-day rental period in front of the Commission for some action.

Sandy Gilbert

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