

News-Press

April 15, 2002
Section: National
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Trend toward 'megahomes' has Sanibel Islanders looking for limits

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Some people feel Sanibel is under attack.

Call it the attack of the megahome.

They worry the island's weathered, foliage-filled ambiance will be replaced with gaudy homes built by part-time residents.

They say those megahomes are about as out of place on this conservation-oriented island as the snow that seasonal residents flee each winter.

"It's the megahome concern, that the island will become an island of megahomes," said Linda Robison, chairwoman of the Sanibel Planning Commission. "It creates a totally different environment, no diversity, no sense of community."

To combat big houses from sprouting like mushrooms, city leaders want to look at regulating house sizes. On Tuesday, they'll be asked to hire a consultant to address the concerns.

At issue are what the city leaders call "disproportionately large homes."

Exactly what that means is subject to interpretation by city officials.

But the bottom line is that some homes are getting too big for some islanders' tastes, and they want tougher regulations - including a possible cap on size.

Supporters of tougher regulations want to maintain the scale and character of the community.

"It's been a hot-button issue for quite some time," said resident Richard Downes, a Sanibel Planning Commission member. "If the present trend continues, structures will completely dominate the landscape and Sanibel will become like every place else: an overdeveloped, crowded piece of landscape."

Opponents fear the rules will have a negative impact, trouncing private property rights and sending potential islanders elsewhere.

"This just kind of blew my mind," said resident Steven Smith. "They're not trying to regulate houses, they're trying to regulate the people who live in them."

"Perhaps next they will want the authority to tell everyone what kind of cars can be parked in their driveways," Smith said. "After all, we don't want those BMWs and Mercedes to change the 'character' of the neighborhood when 'we' prefer Buicks and Oldsmobiles."

Big and getting bigger

Officials say discussion started long before one property owner submitted plans for a 24,000-square-foot home on a 5-acre parcel along the Gulf. That's nearly three times the size of the big homes already on the island.

The plans were later scrapped.

Downes supports the creation of different residential zones, each having specific restrictions on size. That would allow for the large homes along West Gulf Drive, he said. "Some people feel it's discriminatory but any zoning regulation is discriminatory. We're just controlling where they could go."

House plans get approved and rejected in part because of their appearance, size and mass.

If it conflicts with the character of the neighborhood, architect Ron Weaver won't allow it. He's the go-to guy when it comes to appearance, size and mass and his recommendations hold a lot of weight, city officials said.

"Every neighborhood on Sanibel is a little bit different," said Weaver, hired as a city consultant on a case-by-case basis. "It sounds like it'd be subjective, but after you go through neighborhoods and start looking at patterns, you start to see relationships of size and mass."

The process has been challenged at least once in court by a property owner in The Sanctuary whose house plans were denied.

The city won.

Weaver said he's encouraged the city to hire a consultant to really study the island in a much more comprehensive way and to set guidelines.

"I wouldn't want to pay \$2 million for a Gulf-front lot and find out the house I want to build I can't build," he said. But, he added, "people ought to be more sensitive to their surroundings."

"Part of the problem is people who might be building are only here a short period of time," he said, adding they may not be as concerned about the island's character."

Bruce Rogers, planning director, said the goal now is to come up with a law or laws on which to judge any structures to assure that they mesh with the city as a whole and fit in with neighborhoods.

Mayor Nola Theiss said preparing the island for development is important. "We don't want redevelopment to happen

to us, we want to plan for it," she said.

Megahomes is an issue that has affected people all over the country.

"It certainly affected Captiva," she said.

Rather than evaluate each request on a case-by-case basis, the city council wants a plan.

"Until I see what consultants propose, I'm not in favor or against it," she said. "It's a very complex issue."

It's an issue that involves quality of life, private property rights, and the land use plan.

Some regulation on books

Foye Builders co-owner Erika Foye doesn't think there's a need for any more restrictions on building.

"We're not in the business of building big, giant, mansions, so I don't think it would affect our business," she said. "But we're already regulated in several different ways."

Some homes can only take up 25-30 percent of the lot and there's a 35-foot height maximum.

The plans of many houses that are rejected the first time are modified and resubmitted for approval.

That's what the Scribantes have done with their original plans for a 24,000-square-foot home.

Instead, they'll ask to subdivide the property and build a house with about 8,000 square feet under air, said their attorney Kevin Jursinski.

His clients, who have said they want to be permanent Sanibel residents, also want to comply with city rules.

But he's concerned about the direction the city may be headed.

"If they're going to legislate against that, it negates the ability of people to utilize their property," he said. "That to me is troublesome and is going to be controversial ... especially among builders, Realtors and homeowners."

Bill Schlackman, an island resident since 1989, is worried the ambience and mood of the island is changing.

"The very luxurious homes, the very big homes, contribute to making the island overly exclusive," he said. "I would prefer not to see the island become the haven of the very, very rich."

If nothing's done, some islanders fear an end to their way of life.

"The island will become just another Mecca for those who, through personal or business wealth, can capture our precious conservation lands and beaches for their own pleasure and security, and we will have replaced a once vibrant community life with the sterility of a gated environmental ghetto," according to resident John Dillon.

WHAT THEY SAID

"At some point, a single-family dwelling is just too big, disproportionately large for this community, too big for Sanibel." - From a statement issued by the Sanibel Planning Commission

"In my opinion, public displays of monetary wealth are devoid of the elements that make Sanibel a small-town community." - Sanibel Planning Commission member Marie Gargano wrote to the planning director

"What is at stake here is the preservation of the character and uniqueness of Sanibel itself, an issue of great concern to Sanibel residents." - Sanibel Planning Commission member John Dillon

SANIBEL FACTS

The city's Vision Statement states in part: "Sanibel is and shall remain a barrier island sanctuary, on which a diverse population lives in harmony with the island's wildlife and natural habitats."

More than 40 percent of the island is protected wildlife preserves.

About 6,000 residents, mostly white, live full time on Sanibel. That number swells to nearly 20,000 during the winter.

The median age is 60, the median family income is \$64,474 and the median home value is \$333,282.

The island, famous for its shelling, is 12 miles long and three miles wide.

There are 7,075 housing units on the island, and 31 percent of them are used for seasonal, recreational or occasional use, according to the U.S. Census.