



Living with the Land

An eco-friendly community planned for Sanibel will help residents get back to nature

by Beth Luberecki

Sanibel Island has long been known as a steward of the environment. So it's not surprising that it was chosen as the site of a new community that will be as green as the vegetation surrounding it.

"Over 60 percent of Sanibel is conservation land," says Mark Anderson, president of Fort Myers-based Benchmark General Contractors. "It has a population and land-use plan and policies that really are conservation oriented, so it seemed to me that if these concepts would hold water, they would on Sanibel."

Benchmark, in conjunction with the



The University of Florida's Martin Gold (center) accepts Sea Glass of Sanibel's Honor Award from the American Institute of Architects Florida in the Unbuilt Design category.

University of Florida's School of Architecture and the Florida Community Design Center, is developing Sea Glass of Sanibel on twelve acres of land once home to the Old Schoolhouse Theater and the Sanibel Landscape Company. "We named our eco-friendly community Sea Glass because it suggests something very unique and beautiful, created by a partnership with nature and resulting in surprise and delight upon discovery," says Anderson.

The community was actually first planned as a more traditional cul-de-sac-style development. But when the real estate market went south, it led to a shift in thinking among the development team.

"I had just graduated a daughter from college with a degree in environmental studies," says Anderson. "She was educating me over the years of her studies about how the new world had to be different from the old world. The combination of some gentle prodding from my daughter and the harsh realities of the market made me decide that we should probably rethink this. And we should do it in an innovative way."

That thinking led Anderson to reach out to Martin Gold, director of the School of

Architecture at the University of Florida's College of Design, Construction & Planning, and executive director of the Florida Community Design Center. Gold came on board to help bring a new level of sustainability to the project.

Now the plan calls for the twelve single-family homes to cluster around an "eco meadow," a common green space shared by all of the residents. The home's front doors and porches face this space, while garages and driveways have been placed at the back of the units, accessed by an alley-like roadway. Cars can still travel in front of the residences but must navigate a vegetation-dotted street that's as much for gathering or playing hopscotch as for traversing on four wheels. "We have minimized auto impacts on the site plan," says Anderson. "We're trying to get away from big garage doors and wide roads and make this more of a landscaped country lane."

Underneath the homes (which must be elevated per city building codes to deal with flood threats), plans call for cistern systems to collect rainwater that will help maintain common-area vegetation and can be used by homeowners for everything from flushing toilets all the way up to potable water if they choose. "I think the rainwater harvesting is an important piece," says Anderson. "It's been kind of neglected, but I think in the future there will be a lot more discussion about it."

Roofs will be designed to maximize the collection of rainwater and will be outfitted with photovoltaic panels. Additionally, instead of having air conditioning compressors outside of every home, the community will have a common, underground, geothermal AC system that's more efficient and a lot quieter.

"It preserves the natural acoustics of the site and keeps it much more quiet, particularly at night," says Gold. "And you can get almost twice the efficiency by using a larger, more commercial-grade AC system."

In addition to shared vegetable and butterfly gardens and wading-bird habitat, the development will also feature a thirteenth community building that will include meeting space, a kitchen, and bedrooms that can be used by guests of the residents. "Sanibel being what it is, a lot of people build houses for guests that don't appear very often," says Anderson. "Our theory is that we can build smaller homes with a smaller footprint

TOP PHOTO COURTESY OF KIM SMITH; BOTTOM PHOTO COURTESY OF BENCHMARK GENERAL CONTRACTORS



The site plan for Sea Glass of Sanibel clusters the community's single-family homes around an "eco meadow."

and have a shared resource that will bring the community together as well."

In 2010, Sea Glass of Sanibel won an Honor Award from the American Institute of Architects Florida in the Unbuilt Design category. "It's exciting to see work of this type happening in Florida," the jury commented on the project. "The use of New Urbanist ideas...seems ideally suited to this climate and the informality of the lifestyle."

"For the assignment of awards in the unbuilt category, the committee favored projects that showed a clear intent to do something out of the ordinary, to push the envelope in terms of sustainability, building technology, cost effectiveness, or urban improvement," says Kirsten R. Murray, the jury chair and a principal/owner at Olson Kundig Architects in Seattle. "This project had a clear statement of intent to develop a sustainable community with a level of stewardship for an ecologically sensitive site."

That honor should help further set the community apart from other housing developments in Southwest Florida. "It really gives it the recognition in the architecture community that this is a forward-looking project," says Gold. "You can't get an unbuilt award for something everyone else is doing."

As of press time, the development team was working on finalizing the design style of the community. One choice opts for a very modern look, while the other takes a more traditional approach. "We need to not only design what we think the community wants, but also what we know the market will participate in," says Anderson.

Once that is decided, then Benchmark will move forward with securing all of the needed permits to start construction. When it comes time to begin sales, the goal is "to deliver this for significantly less than a million dollars for a lot/home

package," says Anderson.

It is hoped that there will be plenty of buyers out there interested in the sustainable principles Sea Glass of Sanibel espouses. "Given the economic situation, a lot of people have sort of been putting off their retirements or moving to Florida," says Gold. "There's been a lot of hesitation, and whenever that happens, people start doing more homework, reading more, and becoming more savvy when they are ready to make their move. Other things being equal, I think people are going to be really looking for high-quality, interesting things that are ultimately different from the plethora of stuff that's out there."

For more information about Sea Glass of Sanibel, visit benchmark-gc.com/sea-glass.php or call 239-466-1590.

Beth Luberecki is a Venice, Florida-based freelance writer and an editor for TOTI Media.