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Coral Bay Needs Planning for Future and Community Development Corporation, Says AIA Sustainable Design Assessment Team

Details

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A member of the AIA SDAT addresses the crowd at the Coral Bay basketball court on Wednesday evening, May 29.

Coral Bay should form a non-profit Community Development Corporation to ensure that the area's development is planned and resident-driven in the future, according to Roland Anglin, a community development specialist at Rutgers University's Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy.

Anglin was one member of a team which wrapped up an intensive three-day American Institute of Architects Communities By Design workshop in Coral Bay last week.

The seven-member Sustainable Design Assessment Team (SDAT) included architects, engineers, eco-tourism experts, a community development specialist and a marine scientist.

Coral Bay Community Council officials applied for the SDAT grant from AIA as part of the second phase of group's Coral Bay Watershed Management Project. Coral Bay was one of only seven communities chosen nation-wide to participate in the 2013 AIA SDAT program.

The team arrived on St. John on Wednesday, May 29, and met with small groups of stakeholders during the day. On Wednesday, evening, May 29, the team met with about 140 residents at the Coral Bay basketball court to hear how they envisioned the future of the neighborhood.

"We are here to listen to you," said SDAT leader Harris Steinberg, FAIA, the founding executive director of PennPraxis, the clinical arm of the School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania.

The community vision workshop also drew Delegate to Congress Donna Christensen, Department of Planning and Natural Resources' Director of Coastal and Comprehensive Zone Planning Stuart Smith, the developer behind a proposed marina in the area, Guy Benjamin School principal Brenda Dalmida as well as both part-time and full-time residents.



SDAT leader Harris Steinberg listens to residents' vision for the future of Coral Bay.

After touring Coral Bay and listening to residents' ideas on what is important for the area — from being close to nature to ensuring water access and protecting natural resources — the SDAT team prepared a Draft Vision Plan for the future.

About 100 residents packed the Concordia Eco Resort pavilion on Friday night, May 31, to hear that presentation and offer preliminary feedback.

While Coral Bay boasts significant natural resources, many people feel they have no local power, explained Steinberg.

"Starting with the positive, you have significant natural resources, strong institutions and a strong capacity for cultural volunteerism," said Steinberg. "But we heard from a lot of people that there was a lack of local control. Many people felt that it is hard to get things done and there is no planning capacity."

"The results of these planning challenges are the lack of public realm, inadequate transit and environmental threats," Steinberg said. "While there is mistrust of government, there is a need for economic opportunities and improved infrastructure like sewage and paved roads."

What was obvious to the SDAT was that something needs to be done, Steinberg added. "Doing nothing is not an option," he said. "To avoid intensive development and to preserve the Coral Bay that you all love, the time to act is now."

Each team member offered suggestions from their area of expertise as a way to solve some of the problems facing the area while creating vibrant economic opportunities. Seattle-based Civil Engineer Tom Von Schrader explained how letting nature lead the way could help Coral Bay implement green development.

Working with government agencies and community groups, residents should compile a manual of Best Management Practices which should then be enforced, Von Schrader explained.

"BMPs should be enforced and codified when dealing with steep slope design and stormwater," he said. "Develop, codify and enforce these BMPs."

Von Schrader also suggested installing bioswales, using porous pavement materials and creating green roofs.

As a former V.I. National Park employee, coral reef specialist Jessica Hornbeck explained how the natural resources are worthy of protection and suggested steps to protect the bay.

Well-documented studies which inventory the biodiversity of the bay, sediment studies, coral health studies and more will help people to realize the area's needs and how to address them, Hornbeck explained.

"Identify the resources that are stressed and continue to partner with local and national organizations on studies and collecting evidence and data," she said.

As a specialist in urban design and landscape, Louisiana-based Diane Jones, ASLA, RLA, created a conceptual design for Coral Bay which incorporated distinct civic and community, commercial and cultural spaces all linked by vehicular and pedestrian circulation.

"This is one example of how to protect the resources here while taking advantage of development opportunities," she said.

Jones' design included the needs expressed by citizens — water access and parking — while adding their wish list — walking trails and paths, a cultural heritage corridor and limited development — all in a planned and well-managed concept.

Opportunities for visitors to enjoy "experiential tourism" was an important part of that community concept, explained Megan Epler Wood, founder of The International Ecotourism Society and a Core Instructor for the graduate school for Sustainability and Environmental Management at Harvard University Extension.

"This idea of experiential tourism is the hottest trend in travel right now," said Epler Wood. "Travelers no longer want to be passive; they want to engage and be active. They don't want to just go out on a boat, for example, they want to get into the water."

Coral Bay should build on its resources and heritage while creating areas for people to interact, not be separated, Epler Wood explained.

"You should build on your heritage in a moderate and smart fashion," she said. "This should not be done in a haphazard way. This is an instance where planning will really pay off."

[Working with Cristienne De Souza, a Harvard University Sustainability & Environmental Management graduate degree candidate and eco-tourism professional](#), Epler Wood suggested creating opportunities for visitors to access the area's natural resources, and engage with the local community as ways to create meaningful experiences.

De Souza further explained the booming market of experiential tourism, "Travelers are finally recovering from the economic recession, they've taken a step back to prioritize what's most important, and they're hungering for deeper meaning in their lives. They want their travel experiences to help them find this deeper meaning and connection to themselves, the environment, people & culture of the world."

"Coral Bay is the perfect destination for travelers to experience this reconnection," said De Souza. "It's partially because of the region's stunning natural beauty, but it's mostly because of this genuine and very special community of people."

In order to build a diverse and inclusive sustainable community, Coral Bay should form a Community Development Corporation, explained Anglin.

"Many people have feelings of powerlessness here," said Anglin. "You want the capacity to plan and influence development. To accomplish this you should develop a local community-based development corporation which would make a premium of community self-determination and voice."

While Coral Bay must "find its own path," residents should form a non-profit corporation with a mission and set of goals to realize a future for the area that offers opportunity for all residents in a planned and self-determined way, Anglin explained.

Although the AIA SDAT members shared a lot of information with residents last week, the group urged citizens not to feel overwhelmed.

"It's important to not get paralyzed by the breadth of this," said Steinberg. "There are a few early action steps you can do right now that will make a difference."

Steinberg suggested moving the Coral Bay dumpster area to a different, less-visible location off the bay, taking the first steps of creating a nature trail in the area and starting to create a cultural heritage inventory.

The AIA SDAT members will compile their findings into a final report which they will present to CBCC in three months. CBCC will share the team's findings with the community and decide whether or not to move forward with suggested initiatives.

For more information on last week's AIA SDAT workshop, check out CBCC's website at www.coralbaycommunitycouncil.org or call (340) 776-2099.