

Community Conversations - Meeting Notes

Tybee Island: A Barrier-Island Case Study

WORKING DRAFT FOR ATTENDEE REVIEW

Date	August 10, 2026 - 6:00 PM
Guest Speaker	Mayor Brian West, Tybee Island
Host	Michael Collett
Purpose	Educational case study on Tybee Island and lessons potentially relevant to St. Simons Island

Note for reviewers: These are working notes from the meeting, not a formal transcript. Please mark up anything that is incomplete, inaccurate, or needs additional context.

1. Overall Purpose and Framing

The meeting was intended as an educational discussion with Mayor West about the unique challenges Tybee Island faces as a barrier island, how the community has addressed those challenges over time, and whether any of those experiences offer useful lessons for St. Simons.

The discussion was not framed around making St. Simons become more like Tybee. The value was in hearing directly from another Georgia barrier-island community that deals with many of the same issues.

2. Tybee Is Essentially Built Out

Mayor West explained that Tybee Island is essentially fully developed. There is virtually no significant undeveloped land remaining for traditional new development.

Future development pressure therefore comes primarily from redevelopment of existing parcels, replacement or expansion of existing structures, and changes in property use or intensity.

This was an interesting contrast with St. Simons, where there is still a meaningful inventory of vacant residential lots and Planned Development land that could support additional construction.

3. Challenges Tybee and St. Simons Have in Common

- Both communities rely on one primary causeway/access route.
- Both accommodate a significant amount of tourism relative to their permanent resident populations.
- Both deal with carrying-capacity questions, conservation, short-term rentals, water and sewer, drainage and flooding, storm resilience, beach protection, and preserving the unique character and quality of life of the island.
- One recurring theme was that barrier-island communities have to provide services for many more people than simply the number of permanent residents.

4. Parking and City Revenue

Mayor West spent considerable time discussing Tybee's paid-parking program. Parking is not a minor revenue source for the city; it is a central part of Tybee's operating model.

For FY2027, Tybee budgeted approximately \$5.8 million in parking revenue. The city's General Fund budget is approximately \$17.75 million, so parking represents roughly one-third of General Fund revenue and is the city's largest single General Fund revenue source.

Residents do not pay for parking. Tybee has intentionally tried to keep visitor parking rates relatively affordable compared with some other coastal tourism communities, including some in Florida.

There are no traditional parking meters. Parking and enforcement are handled electronically using license plates and an app/payment system.

Mayor West indicated that paid parking has not reduced tourism volume.

My takeaway was that Tybee has created a practical way for visitors to help pay for the additional services and infrastructure required by tourism. The phrase used in follow-up discussion was essentially that parking "helps pay the bills."

5. Police and Municipal Staffing

Tybee has approximately 30 full-time police officers, which is a large police force relative to a permanent population of only a few thousand residents.

Mayor West explained that staffing has to reflect the peak number of people on the island during summer and other busy periods, not just the permanent population.

Total municipal staffing exceeds 100 people, although some functions are outsourced to contractors or service providers.

A useful takeaway was that public safety and other municipal services on a tourism-oriented barrier island often have to be sized for peak population rather than Census population.

6. Short-Term Rentals

Short-term rentals remain an important and sometimes contentious issue on Tybee.

Mayor West described different views within the community, including residents - particularly within parts of the retirement community - who would prefer fewer short-term rentals.

His approach has included considering location and zoning rather than treating every part of the island identically. An area near the beach may be more naturally suited to short-term rentals than an established residential neighborhood.

The general challenge is balancing tourism, private-property interests, neighborhood stability, resident quality of life, and preservation of community character.

7. Water and Sewer

Mayor West indicated that Tybee has sufficient overall water and sewer capacity.

The larger issue is resilience and aging infrastructure. The city has recently spent a considerable amount of money repairing and rehabilitating older underground infrastructure, including portions of the system containing terra-cotta pipe.

A useful point from the discussion was that system capacity and system resilience are not the same thing. A system can have enough treatment capacity while still having vulnerabilities in the physical network i.e., weather events, construction proximity.

8. Beach Nourishment and Erosion

Tybee is currently working with state and federal officials to secure funding for future beach nourishment.

Historically, support has come through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, but Mayor West said federal funding has become more difficult or uncertain this year. The city is working with legislators and other government partners to address the issue.

Mayor West discussed an area where erosion is becoming a serious concern. If that section continues to erode, nearby parking areas could become vulnerable to flooding or submersion during high tides and storms.

This was a good example of how beach preservation, tourism, infrastructure, resilience, and municipal finances are directly connected.

9. Spanish Hammock and Chimney Creek

Mayor West discussed the nearby Spanish Hammock and Chimney Creek communities, which are in unincorporated Chatham County.

Tybee Fire provides primary response for approximately 250 homes in these areas.

An interesting point was that the local-government millage burden for these unincorporated properties can be higher than for comparable property inside the City of Tybee. This does not mean every homeowner's final tax bill is necessarily higher because assessments, exemptions, school taxes, and other factors vary.

The practical point was that being outside an incorporated municipality does not automatically mean paying lower property taxes.

10. Government Structure - Limited Takeaway

Tybee operates with a professional city-manager structure, with elected officials setting policy and city administration managing day-to-day operations.

Tybee has been incorporated for roughly 175 years.

11. Audience Discussion - Future Residential Buildout on St. Simons

There was audience discussion about how many additional homes could potentially still be built on St. Simons and how much vacant residential land remains.

County records identify approximately 1,312 vacant lots of record in five established neighborhoods: Village Area - 469; German Village - 449; Glynn Haven - 273; East Beach - 76; and St. Simons Heights - 45.

The discussion clarified that a plat is the recorded map dividing property into individual lots. For estimating future homes, the important number is the number of vacant individual lots shown on those plats.

As a simple planning assumption, one vacant residential lot represents the potential for approximately one future home. That means the approximately 1,312 existing vacant lots could potentially support roughly 1,312 additional homes, although not every lot will necessarily be buildable because of environmental, setback, utility, access, ownership, or other limitations.

In addition, county parcel records identify approximately 228 vacant parcels totaling about 1,922 acres within the PD, PDG, and PDR Planned Development zoning categories.

These Planned Development parcels are different from the individual vacant lots. They generally represent larger areas of undeveloped property that could potentially support multiple homes depending on the applicable development plan, permitted density, infrastructure, environmental constraints, and future approvals.

The discussion takeaway was that St. Simons still has substantial remaining residential buildout potential: approximately 1,300 potential homes from existing vacant lots, plus additional residential capacity within roughly 1,900 acres of vacant Planned Development land.

This provided an important contrast with Tybee, which Mayor West described as essentially built out and now dealing primarily with redevelopment.

12. My Main Takeaways

- Tybee and St. Simons are different in size, but many of the underlying barrier-island challenges are similar.
- Peak population matters more than permanent population when planning policing, parking, infrastructure, and other public services.
- Tourism can help pay for tourism. Tybee's parking program is a clear example.
- Once an island is built out, development pressure does not disappear; it shifts toward redevelopment, density, intensity, and changes in use.
- Short-term rental policy may work better when it reflects differences among neighborhoods and tourism-oriented areas.
- Water and sewer capacity and resilience need to be evaluated separately.
- Beach nourishment is not just environmental protection. It also protects infrastructure, tourism assets, and the local economy.
- St. Simons is at a different point in its development cycle because it still has meaningful remaining buildout capacity.

Overall impression: The value of the meeting was not in trying to copy Tybee. It was in understanding how another Georgia barrier-island community has dealt with many of the same issues St. Simons is facing, and identifying practical ideas worth studying further.

