

To the Honorable David Harner  
Lee County Manager  
Fort Myers, Florida

April 22, 2024

Dear David,

We are writing to share with you the very special role that the three churches located on Gilchrist Avenue—the First Baptist Church, the Lighthouse United Methodist Church, and St. Andrew's Episcopal Church—have and will continue to play in the ongoing well-being of Boca Grande.

In addition to being caring and considerate citizens of this beautiful island community, members of the collective congregations have assumed leadership roles throughout Gasparilla Island and even into Lee and Charlotte counties. Particularly impressive have been the churches' responses to natural disasters, notably to the recent devastation caused by Hurricane Ian and its impact on people, businesses and infrastructure.

More than ever, these three churches have demonstrated their value to the community by joining together to help maintain a thriving community—not just during the annual winter season but throughout the year.

The First Baptist Church has a rich history dating back to its establishment in 1909. There can be no denying the role it played in offering comfort to the hardy trailblazers who helped make Gasparilla Island what it is today. In 2009, the church building, with its Carpenter Gothic style architecture and locomotive bell, was added to the National Register of Historic Places. Today, the church is well known for providing space and support for the Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon programs and has for more than forty years. Attendance for Sunday services average 70 to 105, depending on the time of year.

Aside from its long history of raising funds for local charities and mission work, the Lighthouse Methodist Church, founded in 1910, played a key role in administering the Hurricane Ian disaster relief fund. The fund was established by seed money from three prominent residents and quickly grew to \$2.7 million in unsolicited donations to help local businesses get back on their feet, to save landmarks, and to boost much-needed emergency communications. The church also opened its doors to provide refreshments and support for first responders and served as school classroom space for the heavily damaged Boca Grande Pre-School. It's ongoing after-school program remains a significant benefit to island workers and their families. For over 30 years, the women of the church have hosted an annual Strawberry Festival at the beginning of March, where 1,500+ persons attend and all monies raised goes to local charities serving women and

children. Of the 350 members, attendance average 225 for the two Sunday services from January thru April, and attendance falls by 25% to 75% in other parts of the year.

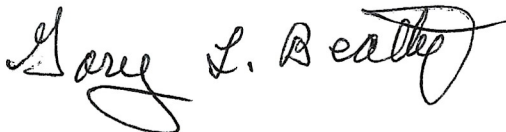
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, established in 1911, completes the triumvirate of beautiful and historic church buildings on Gilchrist. While it attracts a strong congregation during season, it has also opened its doors to fellowship among Boca Grande's year-rounders—those folks who keep the island buzzing when other residents have gone north. When the Baptist Church sanctuary suffered heavy damage in this most recent hurricane, it was St. Andrew's that opened its doors to share Sunday mornings in the church building with its neighbor. St. Andrew's boasts of 300+ members with average attendance of 200+ in season and less in off season.

The fact that these churches and their congregations are once again being challenged in regard to parking on the Gilchrist Median is surprising and disconcerting. All three churches have been exceptional stewards of the median and their properties on Gilchrist. Members of the congregation have been encouraged to park on available street access where possible. The churches also lauded the work done by Lee County to plant more trees and re-sod the median, which now looks better than at any time in its history.

As you are aware, parking on the median is already limited to the hours between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. While some may view the occasional seasonal presence of cars on the Gilchrist median as a personal inconvenience, we hope that you and the Lee County Commissioners will take into consideration all the contributions made to Boca Grande by its churches and their members and act accordingly to keep this area from further burdensome restrictions. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

The Rev. Gary Beatty-First Baptist Church

 11-22-2024

The Rev. Daphne Johson-Lighthouse Methodist Church



The Rev. Michelle Robertshaw-St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

