

WAL-MART IN SEASIDE?

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Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrove Beach. In this column, he explores issues of urban design, big and small, and usually with Seaside as an inspiration, a learning tool, or at least a frame of reference. His firm Schnell Urban Design (schnellurbandesign.com) offers a wide range of services, from designs for entire communities to parks to houses. He also offers walking tours of Seaside by appointment. To schedule a tour, contact Mark at 850-520-0035 or mark@seasidewalkingtours.com. Tours cost \$15 per person (cash only), start at the front porch of Sundog Books, and last approximately 90 minutes. Tours are given in conjunction with the Seaside Institute.

No, there are no plans to build a Wal-Mart in Seaside. Everyone, please calm down.

But let's play "what if" for a moment. What if there was a Wal-Mart in Seaside? Or somewhere along Scenic Highway 30A? Would the design be different? Is it even possible?

Before we begin to explore those questions, let's consider the context. South Walton is home to a brand new Wal-Mart. It's located on Highway 98 across from the Donut Hole restaurant. It's a fairly typical mid-sized Wal-Mart, except they rolled out a slightly updated look (beige instead of gray!). Of course, that's really "parsley on a pig," because it's still a big box, and there's still a parking lot the size of Connecticut in front of the box. Wal-Mart often generates controversy, but this one flew under the radar, and they managed to avoid the proverbial angry mob with pitchforks.

Locally, the reaction has been mixed. Wal-Mart fans are keeping that giant parking lot full, and they celebrate the low prices and convenience. Plenty of others have stayed away, citing the familiar list of grievances, topped by the company's history of killing local "mom and pop" businesses. Like any good controversy, there are valid points and strong feelings on both sides.

(Some have suggested that Highway 98 be sacrificed to the gods of sprawl in order to save 30A from the same fate. I disagree. Why sacrifice anything? It's not too late to save Highway 98 by reinventing parts of it as a truly grand boulevard.)

There are two issues that don't get much attention, and I think it's a shame, because I think they're really the heart of the matter:

1. Wal-Mart is the first South Walton retail since the outlet mall with the strong potential to attract more ugly strip malls, national chains (Red Lobster, anyone?), and everyone's least favorite side effect: traffic. In short, Wal-Mart is the scouting party for the invasion of relentless, mind-numbing sprawl. And this time, it's on the doorstep of 30A.
2. As a symbol of ubiquitous corporate sameness, Wal-Mart is in direct opposition to the essential South Walton brand: a beautiful, one-of-a-kind community full of local businesses and great regionally-inspired design. When we chip away at the qualities that make our community

special, we run the risk of losing our soul. When this place is full of traffic and national chains, and it looks just like everywhere else, people who loved this formerly one-of-a-kind place will just go elsewhere. Our slogan will be: “Visit South Walton. We’re just like Destin!”

Back to those “what if” questions: No, there will never be a Wal-Mart in Seaside or the other New Urbanist communities along 30A. But, with the right design, Wal-Mart could in theory be part of a New Urbanist community or any established urban neighborhood. They would need to alter their corporate prototypes and offer a design that works within a walkable, mixed-use community.

This is exactly what’s happening in Washington, DC, where one proposed Wal-Mart is located on the second floor of a building, leaving the ground level for small local businesses and the floors above for apartments. Another proposed Wal-Mart in DC will place the building close to the street and the parking in the back.

Wal-Mart is clearly willing – in the right circumstances – to change their corporate prototypes to meet the needs of the local community. But in South Walton they were never asked, pushed, or required to do anything more appropriate for this particular community. Who was asleep at the wheel?

We need to make sure that future development of this kind “behaves” and acts as a good neighbor. There are a number of planning techniques, currently in use in forward-thinking communities, which would help the cause:

- The big boxes (and retail buildings in general) should be located close to the street and the parking located in the back. Along with a few other changes, this design improves the character of the street, making it more comfortable for pedestrians, cyclists, and (hopefully) future transit riders.
- Place the big boxes (and retail buildings in general) within a connective network of streets. The typical sprawl layout has a driveway connecting to a major arterial (such as Highway 98), but no connections to other streets or neighboring properties. Repeated for miles, this pattern contributes heavily to gridlock because everyone uses the same arterial, with no alternative routes.
- Encourage big boxes that are two stories with a smaller footprint. Retailers like Target have built successful prototypes for this in cities like Atlanta.
- Front the blank walls of the big boxes with smaller stores.
- Make sure these types of buildings are part of larger planning efforts, where the County, designers, and developers can ensure the cohesiveness of the land uses, buildings, walkways, transit, open space, etc.

By using these and other techniques, South Walton can still be a place we love, despite the inevitable changes and growth.

Will we ever see sprawl development along Scenic Highway 30A? It’s certainly possible. As written, the County’s standard development regulations actually encourage sprawl. If that’s not the outcome you’d like to see, please speak up and encourage sensible zoning such as the Smart Code (smartcodecentral.org). It’s much easier to act now than to fight a thousand Red Lobsters later.