

THE PARKING CONUNDRUM

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In my career as an urban designer, I've found that people mainly fight over three development-related issues: density, scale, and traffic. Wherever there are changes within a community (new events, businesses, developments, etc.), and there are neighbors to speak up about it, you'll find those three issues, front and center. They cause otherwise calm and reasonable people to start screaming at each other. If you thought "politics and religion" were minefields, try discussing changes in density, scale, and traffic.

In long established communities, you'll find a related issue that is every bit as contentious: parking. At a very fundamental level, it's an issue of space. Each parking space requires about 350 square feet by the time you include its share of the drive aisle. That's a lot of space – I once lived in an apartment that was 350 square feet! A typical suburban mall parking lot includes, by code, one parking space per 250 square feet of retail floor area. This is enough to accommodate the two busiest shopping days of the year: Black Friday and Christmas Eve. During the rest of the year, a large percentage of the spaces go unused. In most places, you can't include shared parking in the calculations. Is this a sane parking policy?

According to the US Bureau of Transportation Statistics, the US is home to over 256 million registered vehicles. That's a mind-boggling number of cars to park, and those parking spaces cover an immense amount of land. Statistics like this only begin to hint at the influence of cars and parking in shaping our communities. The reality: we typically design our communities for cars rather than people. That's the issue at the heart of sprawl. But we don't need to be slaves to our cars and parking. It's a design issue, and one we can solve.

After a lull during the Great Recession, these issues are once again topics of discussion along Scenic Highway 30A. Parking is an especially hot topic. I'm hearing about it in Seaside, where certain events and busy tourism weeks bring a flood of people and cars. It's even a hot topic in Seagrove, which is experiencing a small retail and restaurant boom (full disclosure: I'm part of it).

I have some good news for those who are concerned: I'm confident that Seaside and Seagrove are actually becoming better places over time, despite any parking issues.

I sometimes tell my clients that I've never seen a truly great neighborhood or town that has enough parking. Sound crazy? Maybe an overstatement? Not really. Think of the great neighborhoods and towns – the ones that have a very wide appeal, plenty of life and activity, and high property values. As a former resident of the Washington, DC area, I always think of the Georgetown neighborhood as an example. It's a colonial era town with a wonderful walkable scale, and it's popular for both its retail/restaurant scene and its charming residential areas.

However, it can be so difficult to find a parking space in Georgetown that you might think the area would lose popularity and value. Despite this issue, huge numbers of people still go there to shop, dine, and work, and the intense demand for those little rowhouses creates some of the highest property

values in the city. (By the way, transit doesn't reduce much parking demand: Metro trains don't even serve Georgetown.)

If that's the case, how big of a problem is the shortage of parking? I would argue that it doesn't remotely outweigh the positives of a walkable mixed-use design, which creates high value and a high quality of life. Places like Georgetown and Seaside are desirable in part because they are *not* covered in giant parking lots. They have found a balance that does not overvalue parking.

I believe the few parking issues that we have on 30A can be solved with relatively minor changes.

While there are certainly some issues, I don't think Seaside has a significant or insurmountable parking problem. [*Please pause while the columnist dodges tomatoes thrown by some Seaside homeowners.*] I park my car in Seaside several times a week, and I can only think of one time that I couldn't find a legitimate public parking space (the 2012 spring Yard Sale). It's true that you can't always find a parking space directly in front of your destination. You might need to walk the equivalent of a block or two, and many Americans are not accustomed to that concept. That said, I'm not dismissing the concerns: parking is a real issue during certain events and weeks, and especially for homeowners, many of whom find their only parking spaces filled by confused or desperate tourists. I believe those instances can be solved through parking management techniques: Seaside can utilize off-site parking and shuttles, traffic cops, signage, a humane enforcement strategy, and maybe even paid parking. Seaside is currently exploring its parking management options.

In Seagrove, I suggest a different approach: certain areas along 30A and 395 truly need additional parking, and the best solution is to add on-street parallel parking. The current policy for parking on 30A and 395 is definitely uneven (why is on-street parking allowed in some places and not in others?), and arguably not effective (it pushes parking to the side streets). Traffic flow is the priority in certain places, but dangerous head-in parking slows traffic in other places. Parallel parking is relatively safe, only slightly slows traffic, improves the pedestrian and bike environment, and would fit nicely in these locations. I'm even comfortable paying for a spot in those parallel spaces, but only if the meter revenue is directly reinvested in improvements to the streets and sidewalks of Seagrove.

The long term and big picture answers for both communities are the implementation of 30A transit (probably through the Tourist Development Council) and improvements to the pedestrian and bike environments. We simply can't add much more parking without destroying the quality and value of our communities.

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 two hours. Tours are given in conjunction with the Seaside Institute.