

PRIORITIES FOR RESTORE ACT

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The U.S. Congress has not been able to agree on much recently, but they somehow called a temporary truce long enough to pass the Restore Act on June 29, 2012.

The Restore Act directs 80 percent of the Clean Water Act fines from the 2010 BP oil spill to the five Gulf Coast states. The fines will add up to billions of dollars – possibly up to \$20 billion total – and all money allocated to the states must be used for ecological and economic recovery efforts.

What does this mean for Walton County? In all likelihood, it's a once-in-a-lifetime chance to improve our community. Now the fun (and controversy) begins: How should we spend that money? After 16 years in the urban design and planning business, I have more than a few opinions on this matter. Here are my recommendations:

Streetscape for 30A and other important corridors:

30A was born as a rural highway, but that design is no longer adequate for the flood of people using it during peak times of the year. There was a time when there wasn't even a multi-use trail (a.k.a. the "bike path") along 30A, so we're at least thankful for that. But even the trail was designed in a "rural" fashion: a wandering strip of pavement running down only one side of the road, around signs, and across narrow bridges. We're long past the time that this was adequate in many areas. We need real sidewalks, street trees, pedestrian-scale lighting, and parallel parking in all of the non-planned communities such as Seagrove and Blue Mountain. The intersection with 395 desperately needs a traffic light (I prefer this over a roundabout). We need to bury the power lines, and build real bridges over the coastal dune lakes. These changes will help alleviate current problems with pedestrian and cyclist safety, traffic flow, parking, and aesthetics. They will boost economic development, encourage people to walk rather than drive, and improve the quality of life for residents and the quality of experience for visitors. This is my number one priority for Restore Act funding.

A revised set of land use regulations that preserve our natural environment while encouraging great development:

The County's land use regulations are a mess, but it will be a long, complicated, and contentious process to revise and improve them. That's why real change keeps getting kicked down the road. Like most of our County government, the County's planning department has been saddled since the recession with a small staff and budget. Therefore, the staff can't do this alone. Now is the time to use Restore Act money to hire consultants to help the County with some actual long-term planning. (Full disclosure: it's possible I could be one of those consultants, but I would be happy to see it happen one way or another.) With a relatively small investment, we can have a true vision for the future of our community, and a set of regulations that find the right balance between preservation of our natural environment and the creation of a great "human habitat."

Public facilities such as parks, athletic fields, and entertainment venues:

Have you ever wondered why we don't have some of the really basic public facilities found in other communities? In South Walton, we currently have minimal public facilities for athletics (fields, pools, courts, etc.), passive recreation (truly public plazas and squares), and entertainment (large venues). As the area grows more populous, it's becoming a more pressing issue. In any other place, these facilities are simply expected and assumed to be part of daily life. People look at our public facilities, among other factors, when they decide where to raise their families and start their businesses. That said, we shouldn't build these types of facilities to attract *more* people. We should build them to attract the right kind of people: today's creative class entrepreneurs are choosing locations based on the quality of life, and these facilities represent a piece of that puzzle. (Note: These facilities will attract hotels and other development. Start with a master plan.)

A fund for purchasing important parcels of land:

We are fortunate to have a large amount of public land in South Walton thanks to the State-owned parks, preserves, and forests. However, there is no shortage of important parcels that could be purchased either for conservation or for the enjoyment of residents and visitors alike. The most obvious targets are any parcels that would help protect our unique natural environment, and in particular the coastal dune lakes. Other purchases could fill in the gaps in state-owned land, especially along Highway 98, or improve the scenic views along Scenic Highway 30A. Boulder, Colorado has a popular and effective program for purchasing open space that we could use as a model.

Expansion of higher education in South Walton:

A key economic driver in this era of technology and creativity is higher education. It's great that Northwest Florida State College has opened a satellite campus in South Walton, but we need to aim for a primary campus rather than the satellite variety, and place it in a more impactful location. Considering the strong creative community in South Walton, the easiest college to attract or start would be something similar to the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) or Full Sail University. Among all of my suggestions, this one might have the biggest long-term impact on the future of our community.

Other possible uses for Restore Act money: Transit along 30A, electric car charging stations, a parkway connecting central/eastern Seagrove to either Highway 98 or 395, and improvements to make Highway 331 a more beautiful gateway to the beach.

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