

URBAN DESIGN

Principles of a Sensible County Parking Policy

By Mark Schnell



Everyone's favorite development issue — parking — is back in the local news, but this time it's playing out at the county level. Walton

County has proposed two revisions to its parking regulations that would affect all areas except some of the planned communities (such as Seaside, Rosemary Beach, etc.), which fall under different rules. In short, the proposed parking ordinances would require substantially more off-street spaces for future houses and restaurants.

These proposed ordinances have some supporters, but they also have their critics. Members of the business community, and especially restaurant owners, are actively fighting the proposals. Several people in the design community — including myself — have also raised red flags about the proposed rules.

In an attempt to bridge the divide, I offer the following six principles that can be the foundation of a sensible parking policy:

Principle No. 1: Context matters

The proposed parking ordinances are one-size-fits-all solutions: they propose the exact same parking requirements for a rural lot near Paxton as they do for an urban lot along 30A in Seagrove. A more rational approach is to base parking requirements on the context. For example, is the place rural, urban, or somewhere in between? If it's rural, there's little or no need for on-street parking or any additional off-street parking. If it's urban (or what I call "small town urban"), then a higher percentage of the overall neighborhood parking should be accommodated on the streets to allow for a relatively dense, walkable environment. And walkable urban places don't need as many total parking spaces, either. The county needs to create master plans that identify the rural-to-urban context and character for different areas within each neighborhood. Only then can they determine which type of parking, and how much, will be appropriate.

Principle No. 2: Don't base off-street parking requirements on the maximum parking scenario (i.e. the busiest day of the year).

This is another fundamental problem with the proposed ordinances. Building for the maximum scenario has been the policy of most suburban municipalities for many years, and the results have been disastrous. For example, most shopping malls are required to

build parking lots sized for one day of the year: Black Friday (a.k.a. biggest shopping day of the year). The result is an extremely large amount of parking and pavement, most of which is not even used for the vast majority of the year. This also means fewer trees and other natural vegetation, more impervious surface, and much larger distances between buildings, which severely damages any urban character of a place and the quality of the pedestrian/cyclist/transit experience. A much better solution is to require less than the maximum and provide on-street parking for overflow.

Principle No. 3: Build "complete streets" with parallel parking, sidewalks, and lighting

After 30 years of rapid urban growth in South Walton, Highway 30A retains the design of a rural highway (except through the planned communities such as Seaside), and that's not adequate at this point. Instead of requiring every property to have a huge number of off-street spaces, the county needs to allow on-street parallel parking in strategic locations along 30A and other streets — near businesses, beach accesses, etc. — and then build the actual parking spaces. Those spaces not only provide overflow parking for the busiest days, but also provide a buffer between moving cars and pedestrians. The streets should always feature sidewalks on both sides (rather than the current multi-use

trail on one side), and at least some pedestrian-scale lighting, especially near intersections.

Principle No. 4: Provide viable alternatives to driving cars

Cars are a useful and vital part of our lives, but they should not be the only viable option for transportation in South Walton. For decades, American cities and towns have built auto infrastructure at the expense of every other transportation option. Now we're stuck with a nation of very wide streets that are nonetheless choked with traffic. And those streets are rarely, if ever, designed for the use and comfort of pedestrians, cyclists, and transit riders — which only exacerbates the issue. There isn't even room to expand Highway 30A anyway, so there's only one logical answer: add pedestrian infrastructure such as sidewalks, lights, benches, etc., and provide some kind of public transit. We simply cannot solve traffic or parking issues without making some efforts to get people out of their cars.

Principle No. 5: Share parking between land uses

Another downside to the proposed parking ordinance is the elimination of all provisions for shared parking. This is unfortunate, because shared parking is an excellent tool. When an office or bank, with only daytime hours of operation, is located next to a bar or restaurant

(or anything else with only nighttime hours), it makes sense for the two businesses to share parking. Otherwise, each has a parking lot that's empty for half the day.

Principle No. 6: Parking should never destroy the quality of place

Parking issues are in many ways a sign of success. South Walton is a popular tourist destination thanks to more than just the beach: it's also the intimate scale, high quality of architecture, compact development pattern, and preservation of the natural environment. The biggest danger is that we overreact to a problem that's clearly seasonal and limited to certain areas. Instead of large parking lots that destroy the quality of place, parking should be spread out in smaller lots and along streets. We must not destroy the qualities that made this place so great in the first place.

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Seaside's street parallel parking design provides overflow parking for busy days, as well as a buffer between moving cars and pedestrians.
Photo by Mark Schnell