

URBAN DESIGN

# The Tyranny of the Cul-de-Sac

By Mark Schnell



In my walking tour of Seaside, I pause for a few minutes in the gazebo at the intersection of Tupelo and Grove and direct the group's attention to the east towards Seagrove. At that point, I say: "Robert Davis described this street connection to Seagrove, together with the one to the north on Forest, as one of the most radical things they did at Seaside."

Connecting one community to another via multiple streets is radical? Yes, in today's world of development, it's actually quite radical — and sensible, too.

The communities we have built in America since World War II are dominated by the cul-de-sac. I'm not just talking about the circular street termination that's a fixture of the suburban landscape. I'm using "cul-de-sac" as shorthand for any dead-end street that's a branch from a larger or more utilized arterial street (i.e. the main road in an area — Scenic Highway 30A is an example).

In suburbia, this is often intentional. A cul-de-sac is ostensibly used to prevent "cut-through traffic," and keep vehicular traffic limited to the residents of that street and their guests. This is sold as being safer and

quieter than a street with through traffic. This might work to a degree, but there's a big problem: it forces all traffic on that street, and the street next to it (and so on), to all use the exact same arterial. And that, in a nutshell, is why American suburbia is so often choked with traffic: a flood of cars on one arterial street with no alternative routes.

But this also happens somewhat organically in many cases. Growth often happens something like this: someone builds a residential subdivision on the edge of town, just past where a city street becomes a rural highway, and this, in turn, invites more growth. When a shopping mall is built next door, it doesn't connect directly to the subdivision — it only connects to the highway. Now the subdivision and mall are dumping all of their traffic on the same rural highway. The pattern is repeated with new development, including schools and office parks, too. And this, my friends, is how gridlock is born.

Seaside and neighboring Old Seagrove illustrate the alternative: an interconnected network of streets. If one street is backed up (or blocked for some other reason), you can always use one of the other streets to reach Highway 395 and then out to US Highway 98.

You might ask: if that's the case, why is the 30A/395 intersection one of the most clogged in the area? That's easy: every single street east of Gardenia Street (in Old Seagrove), for a full six miles to Watersound Parkway, is ba-

sically a cul-de-sac that dumps traffic on 30A. So next time you are stuck in traffic in Seagrove, you can blame the cul-de-sacs — and the humans who created them. I realize this might be hard to swallow. You once thought the cul-de-sac was your friend. It was going to prevent traffic from coming down your street, and lo and behold, it worked! However, everyone else thought the same thing and did the same thing. Now you are all sitting in traffic together.

So what can we do about this? First, it's important to understand the problem. The issue was actually created a long time ago, and it's unlikely to have an easy solution at this point. There is enough undeveloped — yet already platted — density in this corridor to keep the intersection stacked with traffic well into the future — with or without changes to the intersection. A structural solution such as a roundabout is simply a band-aid, and not a very good one. I've personally advocated for a sheriff's deputy to direct traffic at the 30A/395 intersection on busy tourism days, and the county's limited experiments have been a success so far. This, or a traffic light, could continue to help in the short term.

In the long term, we will need a multi-pronged approach. With a limited amount of right-of-way width on 30A, we can't just add traffic lanes (and it wouldn't work anyway). Instead, we should upgrade our infrastructure in Seagrove so that visitors and residents can comfortably and

safely walk or bike to their destination. We should also implement transit on 30A with frequent service — a shuttle should arrive at a stop every five to 10 minutes. This gives the rider confidence that they will never have more than a short wait for their shuttle. All of these efforts to get people out of their cars would make a substantial difference. There will still be traffic, but we can better absorb the growth that's already on the horizon.

The solution that will most effectively ease traffic is a new street connection from 30A to 395 and/or 98. Unfortunately, that will impact existing neighborhoods and the state forest, and will come with significant costs. Big problems sometimes need big solutions, and those usually involve some trade-offs.

There are at least two options for connecting eastern Seagrove to 395 and/or 98. One is to run a road down the existing utility easement at the east end of Seagrove (near the big electrical facility). This would further divide the forest, but it would at least occur on a corridor that has already been impacted. The other option is to connect 30A to 395 by hugging the southern boundary of the state forest. This needs to be a true "parkway" in which there is a forest buffer for existing development and no new development allowed along the edges.

We're already living under the tyranny of the cul-de-sac. Ultimately, this community will need to decide whether or not we "throw off the yoke."

*Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrove Beach.*

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