

URBAN DESIGN

Speed Limits and the Limits of Speed Traps

By Mark Schnell



I'll begin with a public service announcement: The speed limit on 30A in the vicinity of Western Lake has been reduced to 25 miles per hour. This happened

some time ago, but we are obviously a community with plenty of visitors, so this is bound to be news for somebody. Tourists: you're welcome.

According to several sources, this speed limit was lowered in order to increase safety at the Western Lake bridge where the road is directly adjacent to the multi-use trail (a.k.a. "the bike path"). Pedestrians and cyclists are so close to moving auto traffic that the county decided to take action. Their first move was to lower the speed limit, but the ultimate intention, as I understand it, is to build a separate bridge for the trail. However, that bridge has not been built yet.

The existing bridge is not well designed, so this sounds like a reasonable plan. But I hope they will construct the new bridge soon, because — to paraphrase noted lead foot Sammy Hagar — I can't drive 25.

I'm kidding, of course. I can and do drive 25 ("I swear, officer"), but I admit that I'm having a hard time with it in that specific area — and I'm not alone. I've seen several people get tickets from a state trooper, which until recently was a relatively rare sight along 30A. I've even set my cruise control to keep my speed in check. When I do this, traffic inevitably stacks up behind me thanks to drivers who are going much faster. I'm not sure, but for some reason I don't think those drivers behind me are waving a friendly hello to me.

Why do people drive so fast through this area? Certainly many people are still in the habit of driving at the previous speed limit. But I think there's much more to it: we tend to drive at whatever speed feels right for the given situation, and that entire environment signals that it's okay to drive faster than 25. There are no intersections, driveways, parking spaces, curbs, medians, street trees, buildings, etc. In fact, there's nothing but a lake and a road, so people feel free to hit the gas pedal.

Speed limit signs and state troopers are fighting an uphill battle in a case like this, because they are really just two of the many clues that we subconsciously process when we drive. The vast majority of those clues are cheering on your inner Formula One or NASCAR driver.

Another local example of this phenomenon is on Highway 98 in the vicinity of County Road 393. The speed limit drops in rapid succession from 65 to 55 and finally to 45 for westbound traffic. Sure, there are more intersections and driveways in

this area, but there's almost no difference in the actual road design. Once again, it doesn't feel like you need to slow down because the road doesn't offer enough reasons to slow down. The main thing that tells you to slow down is the speed limit sign, and that's simply not enough: people tend to drive in the range of 55 to 65 miles per hour in this 45 mile per hour zone. I'm not opposed to this speed limit, but the engineers are fighting human nature when they don't change the road design in order to lower speeds. It makes for an effective speed trap, though.

On a side note, this area of Highway 98 includes a sidewalk built directly adjacent to the traffic lanes, so let's hope that officials don't see fit to drop the speed to 25. I'll never adjust to that, and I don't need anyone else "waving" at me. I'd just like people to start building in a reasonable buffer between the road and sidewalk.

But there's at least one place in South Walton where you see most drivers, including myself, actually slow down to an appropriate speed: Seaside. A few years ago, I stood with traffic engineer Rick Hall, who very discreetly pointed a small radar gun towards 30A traffic. We watched as drivers slowed down as they passed from Seagrove into Seaside. This is, of course, by design. The intersections, driveways, parking spaces, street trees, buildings, street lights, crosswalks, pedestrians, and yes, even the speed limit signs, all signal to drivers that they need to slow down — and they generally do.

The parallel parking is one of the main reasons people slow down through Seaside. Drivers are constantly reading the road for those clues, and they know when they see parallel parking that someone might pull in or out of one of those spaces at any moment. But the parallel parking does even more than that: it provides that much-needed buffer between moving vehicles and the pedestrians and cyclists on the sidewalk. I encourage you to try it sometime: walk down the 30A sidewalk through Seaside and then walk the same sidewalk in other areas where there is no buffer. Tell me which one is more comfortable.

(And there's one more reason to love parallel parking: it provides, well ... parking. From what I hear, that's in high demand throughout the 30A corridor. With all of these positive features, someone tell me again why don't we have more parallel parking in South Walton?)

There are places on 30A where people should be able to drive relatively fast, and there are places where they should slow down. It's all a matter of designing for a speed appropriate to the surroundings, and designing for pedestrian and cyclist comfort at all auto speeds.

Unfortunately, you can't cite "road design" to get out of a ticket in one of our local speed traps. But you might feel just a little better knowing that you were speeding in a place that



was (unintentionally) built to encourage it. 🟡

Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrove Beach. His firm Schnell Urban Design (schnellurbanbandesign.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) 419-2397 or mark@seasidewalkingtours.com. Tours cost \$20 per person (cash only) and last approximately two hours. Tours are given in conjunction with the Seaside Institute.

Sandpiper
Vacation Rentals

Leave the details to us.

Sandpiper Vacation Rentals
850.231.0163 | sandpipervr@gmail.com