

URBAN DESIGN

Transit on 30A

By Mark Schnell



I clearly remember the first time I visited South Walton. I was a young-ish urban designer who was excited to finally see firsthand the place called Sea-

side, which was a focus of my studies and an inspiration for my designs. As fate would have it, we had a flat tire at the intersection of Highways 331 and 98 — only five miles short of Seaside. I was not deterred, but my long-awaited visit was definitely deferred.

Later that day, with the tire finally fixed, we crossed Western Lake, giving me a first look at a coastal dune lake and that famous vista. Watercolor was in its infancy, so we passed through quickly and hit the edge of Seaside. It felt familiar somehow. I knew instantly that we had arrived in a special place.

I was knowledgeable about the other planned communities in the area through my work, but I didn't fully understand the big picture of South Walton until seeing it all in person.

I was impressed by the planned communities such as Seaside and Rosemary Beach, of course, but also the older communities of Grayton Beach and Old Seagrove. I loved the moderate density achieved while largely capping building height at 50 feet. And I was impressed by the huge areas of public land that effectively limit development to a long thin stretch along the beach.

When I put all of this together, I remember saying, "This place is perfect for transit."

We have a relatively low-speed linear corridor (30A) that links several dense, walkable, mixed-use communities (Seaside, Rosemary Beach, Gulf Place, and so on.). This is a rare setup, and truly ideal. Most transit systems are more of a hub-and-spoke system that attempts to cover a wider (less linear) area, and they often link walkable mixed-use downtowns with auto-oriented sprawl (rather than other walkable mixed-use areas).

With an effective transit system, we would mitigate some of the growing traffic congestion on our streets, eliminate some of the drunk driving, provide mobility for non-drivers such as our oldest and youngest citizens, create a viable alternative for commuters, save money and the environment by reducing our oil consumption, and provide a valuable service to our many visitors.

Despite the perfect setup and all of these positive outcomes, a discussion of transit always brings out the naysayers. They proclaim: "Nobody will ride transit. They'll just use their cars because that's still more convenient." The car is still king and probably always will be in America, but the goal is not to get every single car off the road. The goal is simply to provide



A transit system along 30A, like the one Sunshine Shuttle's Turtle Express provides during peak seasons, helps mitigate growing traffic congestion on the street.

a viable and convenient alternative that will replace some of the trips by car. When people figure out that they can conveniently jump on a free shuttle, skip the parking headaches, and enjoy a worry-free cocktail at dinner, they are likely to become avid transit riders.

I've been a resident of South Walton for just over a decade now. There has been a lot of talk over those years about transit on 30A, but it was just talk until last summer when several local business owners and Sunshine Shuttle launched a free shuttle on part of 30A. I congratulate and thank all of them for leading the way. The ball is now rolling, so it's time for this community to take the next steps.

Step 1: Form a public or non-profit Transit Authority for 30A. Transit is a community amenity that utilizes our public infrastructure and impacts our daily lives, so it needs to be considered and governed in a community-friendly way. The Transit Authority would make the big-picture decisions, seek funding from public and private sources, and likely outsource the actual service.

Step 2: Upgrade our 30A infrastructure. Most of Highway 30A is missing at least a few elements that make a transit system viable. We can build the minimum improvements without much expense or difficulty: pull-outs for the shuttles, transit shelters to keep riders out of the elements, and sidewalks (and other pedestrian amenities) on both sides of 30A. In the best case scenario, we would build a dedicated lane or lanes for the transit.

Step 3: Determine the right transit vehicles. The most practical vehicle for transit on 30A, at least in the beginning, is a small- to mid-size bus that runs on a relatively clean fuel such as propane. Ideally, we would use an electric vehicle fueled by solar power. In the long run, a fixed-rail streetcar (something like the one on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans) would be the best solution. The right vehicle might be open like a San Francisco trolley or it might be heated and cooled like Boulder's Hop, Skip, and Jump buses.

Step 4: Determine the route or routes. The most often mentioned route is to connect 30A from end to end, or close to it. That should be the ultimate goal, but that might not be the best solution at first. A full 18-mile route will require a lot of vehicles in order to have short enough headways (see Step 5). I can imagine a system that's split into smaller segments at first. The routes would connect the most densely populated areas with the most natural synergies (example: Seaside, Watercolor, and Seagrove).

Step 5: Create five to 10 minute headways. In my experiences, this is a very important step, but one that gets discounted or cut along

the way. Even in an era when we can track the locations of transit via GPS on our smart phones (and that's a feature we'll want), we need transit to be very convenient or people will simply use their cars. When people have the confidence that they will wait no more than five to 10 minutes for the next shuttle, they will happily use transit. Long headways will set up our transit system for failure. Let's move forward, but let's not make that mistake. 🌱

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