

URBAN DESIGN

Breaking the Chains

By Mark Schnell



I have a confession: I love Chipotle.

Yes, I'm talking about the national chain of "fast casual" restaurants with the industrial look and

heavenly burritos.

Of course, this will not surprise any of my friends and family who have watched me bring an extra burrito home from Tallahassee, or more recently, drive to the new Chipotle in Destin to get my fix. But this might come as a surprise to those involved in the local debate over the Hampton Inn proposed for Seagrove. They might think I don't like chain businesses. Not true. I just like them to be in the right places.

The proposed Hampton Inn development has sparked an unprecedented uproar. A huge number of locals, second homeowners and visitors are strongly against it. I'm one of them. There are several levels to the opposition, and the fact that it's a chain hotel is only one of them (it would be the first chain hotel along Scenic Highway 30A). The proposed development, which also includes a mysterious and tiny 660-square-foot retail use

within the pool area (a ridiculous attempt to meet the mixed use requirement), has sparked widespread opposition in the community because of its standard prototype design, impacts on traffic, beach accesses, parking, drainage and safety, as well as its incompatibility with the abutting properties and surrounding neighborhood. Last but not least, it doesn't conform to the rules for the Village Mixed Use category.

(The Walton County commissioners will most likely make their decision on March 5, right around the publication of this column.)

But the fact that a chain hotel has been proposed for 30A means that our days with only a small handful of chains might be coming to a close. We've been "discovered" — even by corporate America — and we're facing a new wave of development. As with any real estate boom, some will be good, some will be negative. As a community, we need to find a way to make sure that the growth — which is inevitable — actually enhances our lives and reinforces our brand to the greatest degree possible.

So how would I react if my beloved Chipotle (or any of the other chains I gladly patronize) were to open on 30A? Believe it or not, I would be very sad to see that happen. The brand of 30A as a destination and as a communi-

ty is that we are a one-of-a-kind place, full of mom-and-pop locally owned businesses and very high quality design. You simply can't find another place like it. When we begin to be just like every other generic place — "Anywhere USA" — then we will lose our competitive advantage. Even though I love Destin and Panama City Beach, we really don't want to follow their lead. It's simply not in our best interests.

I'd like to see our community continue the discussion about chains, and even consider banning some of them. Many communities have done this, and each has tailored their laws to their unique needs. Each community selects a number of business locations — often in the range of 11 to 15 — that define a business as a chain or "formula business." Most of these ordinances do not include such common chain businesses as gas stations, grocery stores, and banks in their ban. And most limit the ban to certain geographical areas, such as a downtown or historic district.

We could follow suit, banning chains only along 30A and the feeder roads (existing chains would be grandfathered). That would send the national chains up to locations along Highway 98, which is a more natural and ap-

propriate place for them.

In addition to a possible ban on some chains — or maybe in lieu of it — we should implement some basic design standards. Mostly, I'm referring to codes that regulate the typical zoning issues of height, setbacks, etc. rather than architectural style. However, we could consider architectural standards in some cases, if warranted. There are model codes such as the SmartCode that can be calibrated for our local conditions. Ideally, we would implement such a code throughout South Walton. But even if it were used on a very small scale — to rescue the troublesome Village Mixed Use category, for example — it would help the situation.

Despite my love for Chipotle (seriously, the hot salsa is amazing), I hope there will never be one along 30A. But I will happily drive — or maybe even bike — to a location along Highway 98 to enjoy my favorite burrito. We are stronger when we keep our standards very high and reinforce the unique qualities that make our home such a remarkable destination and place to live. 🌱

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