

URBAN DESIGN

Missed Opportunities

Don't kick yourself if you didn't get in while the gettin' was good

By Mark Schnell



“W o u l d a ,
c o u l d a , s h o u l d a .”

If you hear those words from someone, you might just be dwelling too much on something that you would have, could have, or should have done differently. What can you do about it now? Just move on.

That sense of regret is relatively common in a growing beach town where the real estate business is king. I'll often hear someone lament that they didn't buy a house or a lot when the market was early in the cycle and prices were much lower.

Seaside might be the ultimate local example of this. The very first lots in Seaside, located along Tupelo Street between 30A and Grove, went on the market in 1981. The least expensive of these lots were listed for \$15,000. Adjusting for inflation, that's the equivalent of \$39,000 today.

That number is just for a lot — it does not include a house on the lot — but that's still a remarkably low number. If a lot came on the market in Seaside for \$39,000 today, do you think it would be on the market very long? Not a chance. It would be one of

the more remarkable real estate bargains I can imagine. Consider that the current value for a house (on one of those lots) in Seaside averages nearly \$900 per square foot. Now that's an impressive return on investment.

So why didn't I buy that lot back in 1981? Or buy one in the decades that followed? I have a pretty good excuse: I was about nine years old when the first lots went on the market. But those of you a little older than me might be kicking yourself. What can I say but, “woulda, coulda, shoulda.”

Missed opportunities in real estate aren't limited to individuals, either. There are plenty of times when our county government (and some private developers) failed to act when the time was right. Of course, it's only considered too late in most cases because the price of land is now very high. We can still fix many of these situations, but it will cost a lot more than if we planned ahead and acted earlier.

In the spirit of learning from our mistakes, here are a few of South Walton's most notable missed opportunities:

A larger and more connective street network

In the 30A/U.S. 98 corridor, you've probably noticed that just about every place you go is accessed by a small handful of roads: 30A, 98, 395, 283, 83, and 393 (along with a couple of the more minor roads, too). Everything else is basically a dead-end

street. This is a very limited network for such a large area. It's a situation that works OK for a while, but then growth exceeds the ability of the network to handle all of the traffic. That time has arrived in some places, and it's beginning to cause some problems. (And if you think 30A is nearing its final build out, I have news for you.) It's not too late, but it's going to be very expensive and contentious to buy land for new roads.

Making the “feeder roads” into grand boulevards

The “feeder roads” such as County Roads 395 and 283 that run between Highways 98 and 30A are the gateway to our community. Unfortunately, they are not very attractive or well designed in most cases. The aesthetics are marred by an electrical facility that is barely screened, and giant poles for power lines that should have been buried. Developments made a conscious effort to “turn their back” to the road by fronting it with parking lots and tall privacy fences. The county and developers should have slowed down traffic, added sidewalks, street trees, and parallel parking, and then require that buildings address the street through front entrances, windows, and building placement. It could have been a grand boulevard — or at least a nice street — that welcomes everyone to our community. Instead, in the area north of Old Seagrove, it's just a conduit for cars and electricity.

Public beachfront land for parks and accesses

After the unfortunate demolition of the Seagrove Villas hotel, I hoped that the county would purchase the

land for a park. It didn't happen, and now there are some large new houses on that land. It was a missed opportunity for a public use of some kind. It could have been a regional beach access or, preferably, just a beautiful park where people could have lunch or watch sunset. Everyone loves the beach, but it doesn't serve the same purposes as a traditional park, and much of it isn't even public. Rosemary Beach provides an instructive example. The eastern and western greens, even though they are not technically public, illustrate the value of a beachfront park. They offer a pause in the dense urban fabric, a place for active or passive recreation, a connection to the water, and a great view. And Rosemary Beach also illustrates the need for more public beach accesses in general. Their accesses get so much use from people staying in communities to the west that they decided to install gates with codes. The scarcity of public beach accesses in that area ultimately created this situation.

Regret is a brutal emotion, and not very helpful most of the time. It's usually better to just move on, but these situations can have value if we learn some lessons and act differently in the future. I hope I will learn to buy that lot in the “next Seaside.” And I hope we will collectively learn from some of these missed opportunities for our community. Sure, it's expensive for the county to buy land, but the land isn't getting any cheaper. ●

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