

## Enough Complaining — It's Time for Action

By Mark Schnell



I'm beginning to wonder which is worse — the development and infrastructure issues in South Walton or the constant complaining about them.

I don't mean to downplay the frustration of sitting in traffic or watching helplessly as another poorly designed subdivision gets built. None of that is pleasant for anyone, and we definitely need some changes in South Walton to improve the situation. (But we're not exactly facing Atlanta-level traffic here. It's not even close.) And I've done my fair share of complaining, especially regarding our county government's chronic inability to provide adequate infrastructure.

But I'm also in the business of designing and shaping communities for the long term, so I'd like to turn some of these complaints into action.

We are in the middle of a building boom and a tourism boom. Both are good for our local economy, and both are frustrating at times for local residents and many visitors. South Walton has been "discovered" by a wider audience and the repercussions of this have become a big topic of conversation — and yes, complaining.

South Walton is growing and changing, but that's really nothing new. The first hospital and high school were constructed just within the last 15 years or so. The first grocery stores

growth that's already in the pipeline. Anyone who thinks we have run out of room for new growth in South Walton would be surprised by the amount of development that is already approved, but has not yet been built. And that doesn't even count the future re-development opportunities.

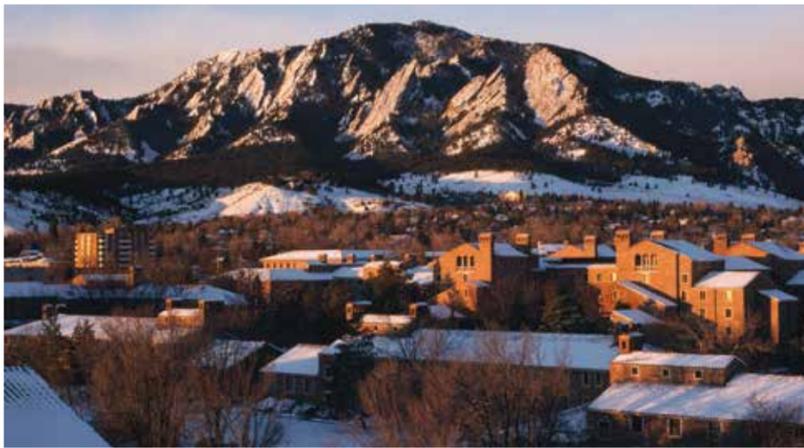
This unresolved issue has caused some locals to want to "shut the door behind them" and stop or slow down new growth. That is basically impossible, but we can manage growth. One way is through regulations. There is no question that our comprehensive plan and land development code need significant improvements, but regulations alone will not solve our problems.

The only sure-fire way to control growth is really quite simple: buy land and conserve it as parks, open space and agricultural land.

South Walton has more than 20,000 acres of protected land in state parks, preserves and forests. That protected land, along with a height limit, has prevented massive over-development of this area. Some have suggested we already have enough protected land. I disagree. We should buy much more land. It would be the fastest and most effective way to preserve our quality of life and natural environment.

We should look to the examples set by Boulder, Colo., and the Hamptons in New York, among other communities.

Boulder voters made history in 1967 by approving a .4-cent sales tax used specifically to buy, manage and maintain open space. This was the first time



Boulder, Colo., has more than 45,000 acres of parks and open space that will never be developed, thanks to its residents. Photo by Wayne Schnell

within easy range of the 30A corridor opened in that same timeframe. Those were big changes for this area, and I think most people will agree they were positive changes. We've also seen the cost of housing go up and up. That's great for homeowners looking to cash in on the rising property values, but not so great for anyone working in this area who can't afford to also live here. Any further growth restrictions would exacerbate this situation. So the realities of growth are fairly complex, and there are no easy answers. Now with the expansion of Highway 331 and the bridge over the bay, we can expect more changes.

For some people, the new development and the larger crowds are signs that the area is changing for the worse. For many new visitors, unfamiliar with the so-called "good old days" of South Walton, it's still a truly wonderful place. They are both correct in a sense. Some people want a sleepy little beach town. Others want the activity and energy (and money) that come with more people. It just depends on your point of view. The only constant is change.

We the complainers of South Walton need to work together to make sure that this place we call home changes in positive ways.

We will need to build a more "urban" type of infrastructure to accommodate the inevitable growth and, at the same time, take measures to manage growth. As the writer Edward Abbey said, "growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell."

We need new sidewalks, bike paths, street drainage, and a more connective street network just to accommodate our existing conditions and the

any municipality in the United States had voted for a tax increase specifically for that purpose. This tax has been extended and increased in the years since then. It's a popular program: two of the referendums in the 1980s passed with 77 percent and 76 percent of the vote, respectively. In 2013, the citizens voted to extend the tax until 2034.

Boulder's open space sales tax has been popular because it has worked exactly as planned. Thanks to the open space acquisition program (and a few other sources), the residents there (which included me back in my college days) enjoy more than 45,000 acres of parks and open space. The city is surrounded on all sides by open space and the mountain vistas from the valley have largely been maintained. That open space land will never be developed.

Meanwhile, Boulder has aggressively established policies that encourage a livable form of what I call "small town urbanism." They have created a strong transit system, built pedestrian and bike infrastructure, and encouraged moderate densities (within a height limit) that make that transit, walking and biking even more viable.

The Hamptons followed a different, but no less effective path. While visiting the Hamptons, I was shocked by the large amount of agricultural land and protected open space. With a beautiful natural environment, and a location only two hours from New York City, the area could have been overrun with sprawl a long time ago. But the locals stopped complaining and took action.

In 1998, they established the Community Preservation Fund for five communities on the East End of Long



In East Hampton, nearly 40 percent of its 70 square miles is in public ownership, mostly in the form of open space. Photo by Mark Schnell

Island. They obtained from the state legislature the right to levy a 2-percent real estate transfer tax on land and housing sales. In East Hampton, for example, the tax is levied on buildings where the price is \$250,000 or more, and the first \$250,000 is exempt. The same applies to undeveloped land where the price is \$100,000 or more. The buyer pays the tax. The money can be used only for the purchase of open space, farmland, certain historic structures, and certain recreational amenities, and it can only happen in the town where it was collected. At this point, nearly 40 percent of East Hampton's 70 square miles is now in public ownership, mostly in the form of open space.

Is the use of a sales tax or real estate transfer tax a good move for South Walton? Yes, I think it could be part of the answer, just as it has been for these other communities. I think we should at least explore the possibility, because it's ultimately the only effective way to control growth. We could also pursue private and nonprofit ways to accomplish some of the same goals.

Every parcel we could purchase with the resulting fund would be preserved forever. Best of all, none of those parcels would ever become the home of a Hampton Inn. 🌿

Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrave Beach.



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