

URBAN DESIGN

Still waiting to cross the street

To fix many street issues along 30A, we must reimagine the way people travel on it

By Mark Schnell



In a recent column for the Seaside Times, I described my experiences trying to cross County Road 395 in Old Seagrove as a pedestrian. The crossings didn't go very well, except for the fact that I somehow survived all of them. Mostly I stood at the edge of the street and waited in vain for someone to stop, or even slow down. My argument in that column, in short, was that the usual desperate measures employed by a local government — crosswalks, flashing lights, etc. — are not enough to make a street like 395 actually walkable. It requires several design features working in unison to create a whole that's greater than the sum of the parts. We must create the conditions for pedestrians to be equal partners in the street.

I'm sorry to report, but the situation is not getting better. In fact, it's getting worse. I will need some new running shoes, because now I will need to sprint across 395. Or maybe pole vault.

The Walton County Board of County Commissioners recently approved a new design for the 30A/395 intersection. Prior to that meeting, I reviewed the proposed designs and, noticing some issues, decided to submit my own design for their consideration. I design streets as part of my urban design work, and I know how to balance the needs of drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians. (I create places that even get Texans out of their cars to walk — and that's not easy to do.) The area in question is in the middle of my neighborhood, so

I'm especially concerned about the situation. I thought it was a chance for me to help. The worst they could do is say "no," right?

Well, as you might expect, they did indeed say "no," but not before a couple of them first questioned my lane widths and use of parallel parking. I was happy to answer the questions during that public meeting. I explained that their proposed 11-foot lanes are too wide. That's literally the size of highway lanes, and people will drive much too fast through an area that's filled with pedestrians and cyclists. And the parallel parking is needed to buffer those pedestrians and cyclists from the traffic, as well as to provide parking for the beach access and future businesses and residents at that intersection, especially now that the head-in parking will be removed.

From the perspective of a professional with more than 20 years of experience designing streets in walkable mixed-use places, the responses and the tenor of the discussion were, well, let's just say "interesting."

There was concern about trucks in those narrow lanes (even though those trucks somehow navigate the narrow lanes of America's oldest neighborhoods — as well as places with narrow streets like Seaside and Rosemary Beach — every single day, and without issues).

There was a comment and gesture to suggest that narrow lanes are uncomfortable to drive. (Good! That's the idea! You might just slow down and avoid hitting that child riding a bike.)

They said parallel parking will inhibit the flow of traffic. If unobstructed flow is the only goal, then why not build a highway flyover at the intersection? The answer: Because it's not



the only goal. And will the flow be better when the patrons of the nearby beach access and businesses circle the block five times looking for a parking space? No.

And a Walton County engineer explained that the 11-foot lanes are the county standard. (That's probably a good place to start: Let's throw out the standards! We can do a lot better!)

Everyone would like for traffic to flow more efficiently through that intersection, but the proposed cure is worse than the disease. The real problem is the lack of a connection between 30A and 98 in the eastern part of Seagrove, and there is no design for the 30A/395 intersection that will fix the problem if that's not addressed. So I need to ask: If it won't really work, why sacrifice the center of an established neighborhood that's just hitting its stride with new walkable mixed-use development? And do they really think that all of the pedestrians and cyclists who use that intersection will magically disappear from 30A? On the contrary,

they are increasing in number, and future development at the intersection — particularly commercial development — will only further increase the numbers.

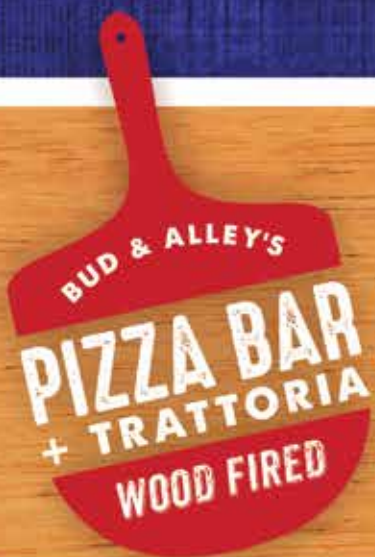
The only other option to fix that intersection — and many other issues along 30A — is to truly reimagine the way people travel on 30A. Establish transit as a viable alternative. Make it truly comfortable to walk and bike. All of that is possible, and it's actually a huge opportunity. But it will require more thought and creativity than simply adding highway-sized lanes through Old Seagrove.

There is a long and very positive history of prioritizing walkable mixed-use communities in South Walton. The Trust Plan, a vision for South Walton completed in the early 1990s, heavily informed the development codes that have been in use ever since. And, despite plenty of flaws in the current code and street design standards, the area remains relatively walkable. Even where they are not very mixed-use or walkable,

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Three great restaurants on the beach in Seaside, Florida

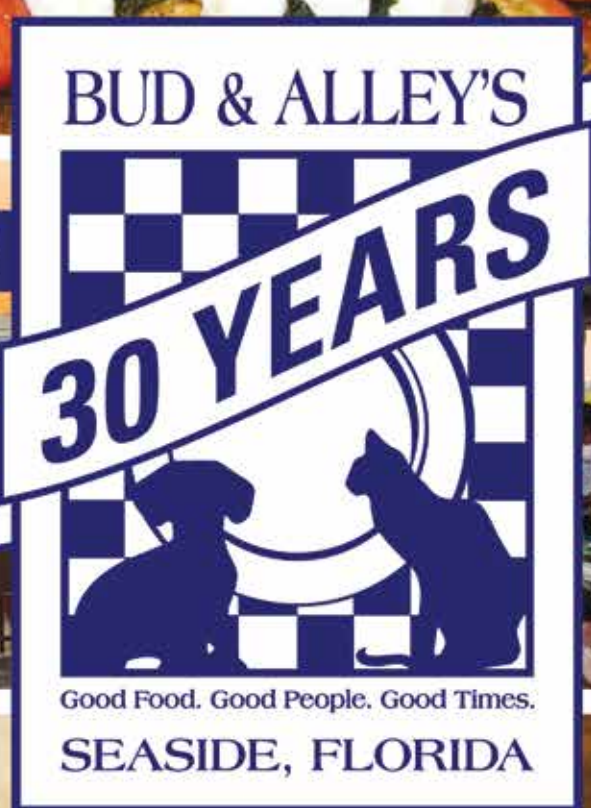
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our communities and streets are not beyond redemption. But we can't start heading the wrong direction on street design.

On the night they approved the new intersection design, some of the commissioners admitted that they didn't know much about street design. I offered in an e-mail to walk parts of 30A with the Commissioners and show them what works and what needs to be changed. Nobody has accepted my offer so far. That's unfortunate, because streets are a key element of a thriving community.

So, for the benefit of current and future political leaders here in Walton County, here is a brief primer on how to create a good street (I'm jaded enough that I'm not even aiming for "great" at this point):

- 1. Street design depends on context.** A street in the middle of a South Walton walkable mixed-use community should not have the same design as a rural highway. A street in Seagrove, for example, should have a completely different set of design characteristics (see below), and 11-foot-wide lanes are not appropriate.
- 2. Use narrow lanes.** The old phrase "speed kills" is a shorthand way to explain this, because wide lanes encourage higher speeds. There are very good arguments, based on accident data, that say that no lane — even on highways — should be wider than 10 feet. So if highways don't need to be wider than 10 feet, then streets where the speed limit is 25 miles per hour or less certainly shouldn't be 11 feet. Therefore, nine or 10-foot lanes are appropriate for the vast

majority of 30A, 395, and other local streets. And for a neighborhood street that doesn't carry much traffic, the lanes shouldn't be wider than eight or nine feet. Most of the streets in Seaside have eight-foot lanes, and the gravel streets in several neighborhoods, including Old Seagrove, are even narrower.

- 3. Provide parallel parking.** As I mentioned earlier, parallel parking buffers pedestrians and cyclists from moving traffic and provides overflow parking for residential, commercial, and civic uses (such as the beach). And parallel parking is almost always preferable to a giant parking lot. It spreads out the parking in a way that helps the pedestrian/cyclist environment rather than harming it. Parallel parking also subtly calms traffic by making drivers more alert for cars entering or departing the parking spaces. At a time when citizens are concerned about parking, the answer to any parking shortage, real or perceived, is available right now along every right-of-way the county controls.
- 4. Plant street trees.** Preferably, plant native live oak trees along 30A, and plant them in a landscape strip between the curb and the sidewalk. They provide shade and a buffer for pedestrians and cyclists, look beautiful, and make a street feel more intimate and comfortable for everyone. How could anyone look at 30A through Rosemary Beach and think this is a bad idea? Strangely enough, I can't think of a single street tree along 30A that was planted by the County.
- 5. Provide streetlights.** But make sure they are pedestrian-scale streetlights that are mounted on

eight to 12-foot tall posts. Have you ever driven down 30A at night and experienced that awful moment when a pedestrian steps out of the darkness in front of your car? It can be very difficult to see pedestrians and cyclists along 30A in areas where there are no streetlights, and the chances of accidental injury or death are growing exponentially with the growth of tourism in this area. It's irresponsible to pretend that 30A is a rural highway any longer.

- 6. Provide sidewalks on both sides of the street.** Sidewalks are not always needed on the smallest of neighborhood streets with very little traffic. But, everywhere else, they need to be provided on both sides of the street. The notion that a sidewalk (or "bike path" as our wider version is called) is only necessary on one side of the street is another example of how 30A and 395 are still seen as rural highways. But we are dealing with urban conditions and populations now, and the infrastructure is no longer adequate. Walking and biking can be legitimate alternatives to driving, but only if we make them easy, comfortable, and convenient.
- 7. Blur the lines between pedestrian space and car space.** This is only for areas with speeds of 25 miles per hour or less, and it might be the most counter-intuitive aspect of street design. Conventional wisdom in the engineering world is that you must separate the modes of transportation (cars, bikes, pedestrians, transit) to ensure safety. This is needed with higher speeds, but it's not applicable in slower speed areas like much of 30A. The problem is that separation inevitably favors cars, and that's not what is needed in a walkable mixed-use environment such as the 30A/395 intersection. Pedestrians need to

feel like they can comfortably cross a street — or really inhabit that street for a moment — and drivers need to feel that they are sharing the space with others. Seaside is an excellent local example of this, and it didn't happen by chance — it is 100 percent by design. The alternative is to let cars completely rule the road, but we can see the effects of that in all of the places we have no desire to emulate. The 30A corridor has been different, and that blurring of the lines between pedestrian space and car space is a big part of what makes it such a special place.

Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrove Beach. Among his most prominent projects are three New Urban beach communities on the Texas coast: Cinnamon Shore, Palmilla Beach, and Sunflower Beach. Learn more about his firm Schnell Urban Design at SchnellUrbanDesign.com.

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