

URBAN DESIGN

A New Era for Mobility on 30A

SEASIDE is once again leading the way to improve life in South Walton and beyond

By Mark Schnell



*“You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”—R. Buckminster Fuller*

Seaside changed the way we design and develop communities by creating a new model — built on lessons learned from the past — that exposed the existing model of sprawl as exceedingly dysfunctional. (I can’t say it made the existing model obsolete, because there’s plenty of sprawl still being built, but it created an alternative that has inspired significant changes.)

In the world of transportation, we’ve been patiently waiting for someone to create a new model. In the United States, we largely move through our cities, towns and countryside by driving private automobiles fueled by gasoline. It’s remarkable in this technology-driven society that this has been the case for the last hundred years. Even the engine that powers our movement — the internal combustion engine — hasn’t changed much over the years. It’s more efficient, powerful and reliable, but it’s still the same basic technology.

There have been plenty of visions of the future of transportation. Remember the Segway? According to its inventor, it would change the way we travel. It didn’t quite work out that way. Unless you take one of those Segway tours in a historic destination, you probably don’t use them. And how many films and TV shows have predicted flying cars of some kind in our future? I can think of everything from “Blade Runner” to “The Jetsons”



providing a vision of that, but so far, we still have our feet on the ground for local transportation.

Now “automated vehicles” are the next big thing, and you might be wondering, based on past experience, if this is all hype. It certainly sounds fairly futuristic at this point. As it turns out, the future is probably not all that far away.

Car manufacturers, technology companies and universities are indeed working on creating automated vehicles, and they are making significant progress. There are still some hurdles to jump, but my impression is that automated vehicles are much more a matter of “when” than “if.”

As the name suggests, you will be able to call a car (or any vehicle, really) on-demand from your smart phone. It will pick you up, drive you to your destination, and it will then zoom off to another user or a remote parking lot. The vehicle will do all of this without a human driver. You probably won’t own the car, but you’ll pay on a per-trip or per-mile basis.

I had the pleasure of attending the 30A Mobility Conference, hosted and produced by the Seaside Institute and the International Transportation Innovation Center (ITIC) in May. This effort was created and spearheaded by Seaside founder Robert Davis, who is once again leading the way to improve life in South Walton and beyond. It was fascinating to learn about the many possible permutations for transportation in the future, based on current and future technologies. Automated vehicles were only one of the technologies discussed, but they were clearly the star of the show and the

focus of much ongoing research and development.

I was invited to join a panel discussion on the urban design and street design impacts of this technology. Davis was the moderator, and asked about the short-term impacts of this technology if implemented on 30A, and the long-term effects of the technology on cities and towns in general.

I started by warning that people have responded to issues of traffic congestion in the past, too. But their answer was to increase capacity and efficiency by building larger streets and parking lots. That didn’t really work (or work for very long), and it ruined many communities. So I encouraged people to create mobility solutions that followed three axioms of urban design (that I formulated that day):

1. First, build for pedestrians (transit doesn’t work without it).
2. Scale is (almost) everything (people love South Walton because it is built to human scale).
3. The magic of urban design happens where the public realm meets the private realm (so build a great street, but don’t forget about the codes that generate private development).

For the question about short-term impacts, I described automated vehicles as a remarkable opportunity for the 30A corridor. Scenic Highway 30A was born as a rural highway, and a city grew up around it. Yet it still maintains the qualities of a rural highway, including the street section, the drainage, and even the bike path meandering along one side of the highway. With the ever-increasing population of residents and visitors using this rural highway, it’s time for 30A to grow up and become something more appropriate for the current needs of the community. When we finally rebuild 30A with street trees, sidewalks on both sides, street lights, parallel parking, etc., we need to also incorporate the dedicated lanes and the necessary communications technology, signals,

lane striping, etc. that allow for automated vehicles.

For the question about long-term impacts, I talked about parking and how it shapes places. When I first heard of automated vehicles, I wondered if they would have much impact on the shape of our cities and towns. It was only when I realized that an automated vehicle doesn’t need to park anywhere near you — on either end of your trip — that I understood the full potential of this technology.

Parking is currently one of the primary drivers of urban form, and that’s not an ideal situation, to say the least. Whether due to our dependence on automobiles, or our codes that require excessive amounts of parking, the end result is a huge amount of land paved over for parking spaces. A future with automated vehicles would offer the chance to utilize fewer parking spaces in the middle of our communities. (Most parking would be in centralized parking areas just outside of communities.) This frees up land to either be more densely developed (think older parts of Europe) or to return to being in a more natural state of parks and open space. Either way, it’s an exciting prospect for urban design and our quality of life. Places can once again be built specifically for the size and needs of humans rather than cars.

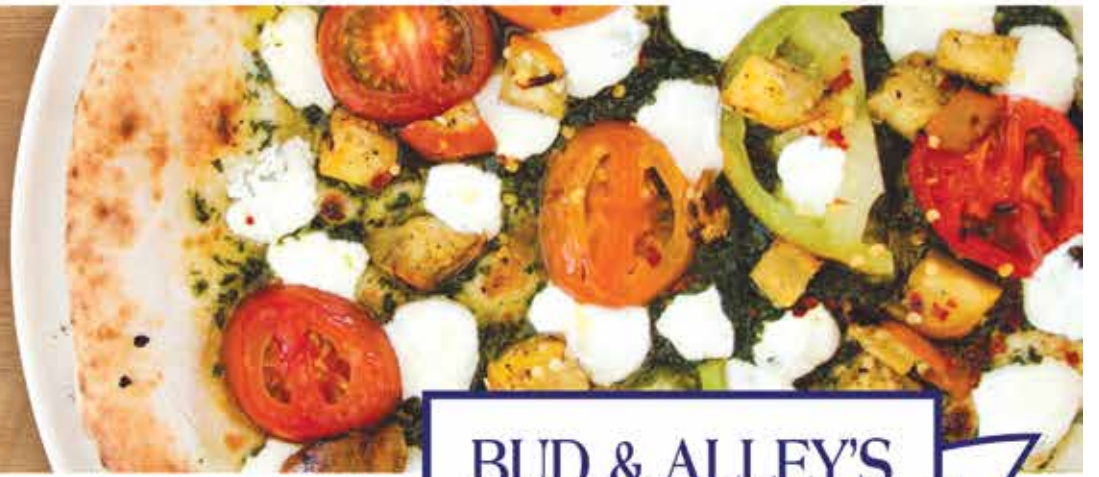
Our communities along the 30A corridor can become early adopters of automated vehicle technology, but we need to be willing to take action. As the 30A Mobility Project gains steam, it will need support from the local community and political leaders. I hope everyone will get on board.

*Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrave 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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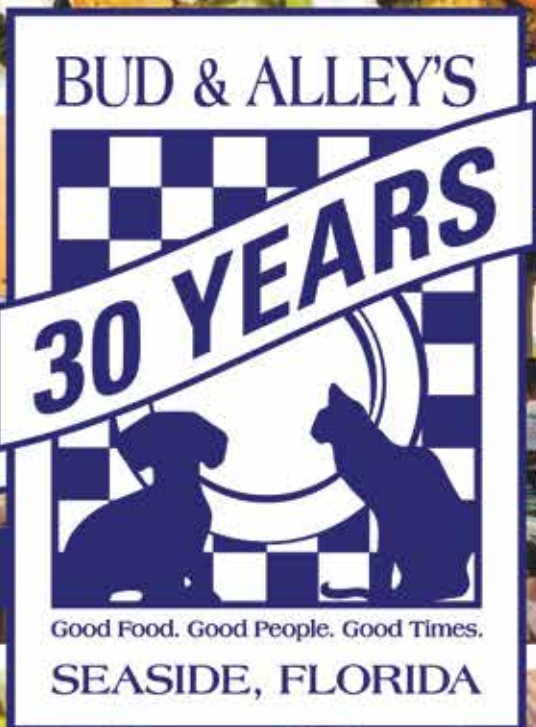
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