

A Few Simple Rules

With pressure to generate and repair urban communities, the regulations take on new importance

By Mark Schnell



At the risk of oversimplifying, I could argue that the history of American governance can be distilled down to one question: Where do we draw the line with regulations?

Some want no rules at all. Others want a robust regulatory state. Most of us fall somewhere in the middle. (And a few want rules for everyone but themselves.) Nobody likes to be told by their government that they can't do something, but sometimes it's in the best interest of the greater society that we all follow certain rules. We are at a pivotal moment in this debate. The regulation wars are being fought right now from the federal level down to the local level.

Local land development regulations are one of the more notable battlegrounds right now. New Urbanists are at the forefront of the debate, offering solutions that go beyond the typical "more regulation" versus "less regulation" dichotomy. We are simultaneously arguing for new and improved land development regulations, as embodied by the SmartCode and other form-based codes, and a set of measures that reduce red tape for creating urban places, as exemplified by the Lean Urbanism and Incremental Development movements.

This is not as contradictory as it might sound, mostly because the SmartCode is intended to simplify and improve land development regulations, even as they become more fine-grained. More than anything, such codes are intended to move past the one-size-fits-all regulations that generate conventional suburbia in order to create urban and rural places, too.

The creation of great urban places has become a much more urgent topic in the last few years. Demand for walkable mixed-use places is soaring right now, and prices are higher than ever in America's most livable and desirable urban centers. With this pressure to generate and repair urban communities, the regulations take on new importance.

But the vast majority of our local governments have no idea how to create great urban places, both in terms of their regulations and knowing when to get out of the way of the private sector. They are well versed in creating sprawl, but nothing close to functional urbanism (or, in the case of South Walton, more of a "small town urbanism"). This is a big problem.

Land development regulations are the DNA of our communities. The rules generate form, and the quality of what you get is entirely dependent on the nature of those rules. We need well crafted rules, and they need to be easy to use. The goal, then, is to create "a few simple rules" for land development.

Walton County is grappling with these issues right now as it works toward updating its comprehensive plan and land development code. This should be an interesting process, to say the least. (Several of the large planned communities — including Seaside, Rosemary Beach, and others — are governed by their own set of rules. Therefore, this update will not apply to those communities. It will, however, shape the development of the rest of the county.)

I'm here to offer my **Five Essential Steps** for Walton County as they work through this process:

Step 1: Identify parcels for preservation. Start by protecting the places that we can't really replace: the most

important areas of our natural environment and the buildings and landscapes that reflect our community's history. The county currently has no master plan for the acquisition and preservation of important parcels and buildings. Without a plan, we risk losing some of them forever. The obvious targets for acquisition — the protective dunes along the Gulf of Mexico and the Coastal Dune Lake ecosystems — are more likely to be protected if placed at the top of an official priority list.

Step 2: Assign a Transect Zone to every parcel in the county. The Transect is the gradient of land development from rural to urban. It's used in New Urbanist codes, including the SmartCode, to assign development regulations (height, setbacks, etc.) to a parcel or set of parcels. This is different from conventional land development codes that assign those same regulations based on land use (residential, commercial, etc.). The Transect is an ideal framework, because you can create great rural places, great urban places, and everything in between. Assigning Transect Zones might sound difficult to accomplish, but it's much easier than one might think. It's just an overlay that wouldn't affect the Future Land Use map, so you would avoid battles over land use and density. And the existing mixed-use parcels (especially Village Mixed-Use) are obvious candidates for the more urban end of the Transect. Ideally, the Transect Zones would match the six in the SmartCode, but even a simplified version with three zones would work better than the current system. For that matter, just adding an "urban" zone would help immensely.

Step 3: Create simple, easy-to-use, and effective land development regulations for each Transect Zone. I am perpetually amazed that Walton

County has the same setbacks for nearly every single residential lot (except for those in the planned communities that created their own rules). Remarkably, context makes absolutely no difference. The front setback, for example, is 20 feet whether you are on a small lot in a mixed-use walkable environment or on a large rural parcel. This one-size-fits-all approach is a serious impediment to creating great places, especially in more urban conditions. The better technique is to write regulations for each Transect Zone. In urban places, buildings should be positioned close to the street, multiple stories are allowed, and storefronts should include plenty of doors and windows to draw in pedestrians. In rural places, buildings are arranged exactly the opposite: they are usually set back a large distance from the road, most are just one or two stories in height, and there is no need for transparency in the form of storefronts. Keep the regulations simple, don't try to regulate every little thing, and use graphics rather than text where possible to make them user-friendly.

Step 4: Create a county-wide transportation master plan that encourages multiple modes of transportation and a connective network. As baseball great Yogi Berra once said, "You need to be careful if you don't know where you are going, because you might not get there." Without a plan for transportation in Walton County, we might not get there — or anywhere — easily. Part of this is simply planning for transportation modes beyond cars, whether transit, autonomous vehicles, or just good old walking and biking. But the other part is creating a better, more connective network of streets and roads. Most of our traffic issues can be traced back to

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Pink is the New White

A true rosé comes to SEASIDE*

By Jill Tanner

Chef Jim Shirley's history with the Bilbro wine family is a long and flavorful one. Well before Jake Bilbro's Limerick Lane Wines came into being, young Shirley spent time pig hunting around the Bilbro property in Mendocino, Calif., collecting porcini mushrooms and dodging wild hogs with Jake's father, Chris. As Shirley tells it, Chris was the mushroom guru. Conversations over the years between Shirley and Jake centered not so much on mushrooms and pigs as on Jake's passion, wine. He spoke of making a new label many times.



pure and refreshing beginning to the raising of a glass. The flavors of Meyer lemon, fresh strawberry and limestone instantly act in agreement to the aroma at the first sip. The clean finish of this rosé allows you to savor almost any cuisine while drinking it.

Summer in Seaside is beautiful, just right for sipping rosé outside, sharing small plates and lingering for hours. The Rosé of Syrah is the perfect wine to savor while socializing at 45 Central Wine Bar. Best enjoyed while paired with people-watching from the patio.



Following a trip to the Provence region of France and specifically after enjoying many bottles of rosé in the small village of Cassis, known for its wine and seafood, Jake returned to the States committed to making "true" rosé, not a saignee or "bleed" of pinot noir or zinfandel. Jake explained, "The grapes were grown and picked specifically for this wine. Our goal start to finish, was to create a wine that somehow brings the feelings and flavors of the rosé and mussels in the open-air restaurants in Cassis to our homes, back yards and tables here."

Shirley gathered some of his staff for a tasting. And they confirmed that the Rosé of Syrah was in fact the best rosé they had ever tasted. It has an aroma of wet stone and grapefruit zest, which brings a



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the lack of a truly connective network of streets. Therefore, Walton County should require that new streets connect to the surrounding network of streets as much as possible. Dead-ends and cul-de-sacs should be allowed only by special approval when there's no other option (due to wetlands, etc.). It's important to make this happen on a large scale, because nobody wants their street or neighborhood to bear the brunt of traffic when it's the only alternative route. Another technique is to establish a maximum block perimeter. This creates a much more pedestrian-friendly grid of streets.

Step 5: Create a series of standard designs for streets, roads, and alleys that reflect the rural to urban Transect. Urban streets typically include features like narrow lanes, sidewalks, parallel parking, street trees, streetlights, and curb-and-gutter drainage. Rural roads typically have none of these things (except maybe a multi-use path). Unfortunately, Walton County has a huge number of rural roads in settings that really need urban streets to accommodate the existing urban conditions: higher density, greater mix of uses, and higher volume of pedestrian and bicycle traffic. Even 30A is largely designed as a rural road between the

planned communities. A rural road design makes sense for 30A through the State Forest, but not through Seagrove. Since we already assigned a Transect Zone to every parcel in Step 2, the assignment of the adjacent streets, roads, and alleys is an easy exercise.

Sadly, I'm not optimistic that any of these Five Essential Steps will be implemented. Several of our local planned communities are world-renowned for their urban design, and the techniques used to create them are widely studied and emulated, yet we can't seem to implement any of it in our own back yard. Who are the people holding us back from creating better communities, and how do we get them on board?

A final plea to Walton County: If you can't implement any of the Five Essential Steps above, please at least implement the following 10 Incremental Improvements:

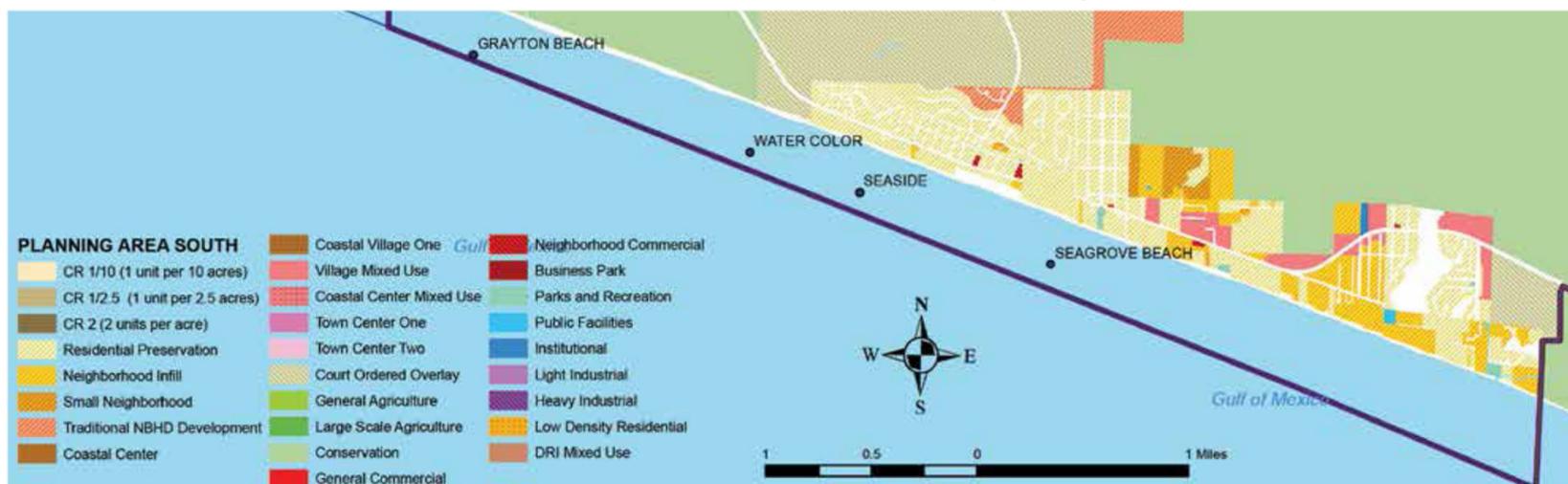
1. In commercial and mixed-use districts, require that buildings be located close to the street, with the parking located in the back of the lot.
2. For all types of development, require that off-street parking be accessed from the most minor of the adjacent streets or alleys. This will help minimize the number of driveways on 30A, which will in turn help the pedestrian and bicycle environment.
3. In areas where commercial development abuts existing residential areas (i.e. most of the Village Mixed-Use parcels along 30A), require that commercial development include some residential development. By default, a development that includes even one residential unit will be a better neighbor.
4. Likewise for such mixed-use areas, require some commercial along the street to prevent gaps in the commercial frontage. With continuous storefronts, or at least minimal gaps, people will happily walk to the next store. If there's a residential development between them and the next store, they are more likely to just get in their cars and leave the area.
5. Allow and encourage public parking, on-street parking, and shared parking.
6. Change the standards to allow for narrower streets and lanes, especially in areas of heavy pedestrian and bicycle traffic. This slows down traffic and makes the street more comfortable for pedestrians and cyclists.
7. Provide pedestrian-scale streetlights at key intersections and crosswalks along 30A and the feeder roads.
8. Build sidewalks on both sides of every major street, including 30A.
9. Allow accessory dwelling units on

10. Limit the width of driveways to 24 feet total within the right-of-way, whether in one or two driveways.

These 10 Incremental Improvements would be much better than nothing, and would create more vibrant and livable communities in the county. Most importantly, they would allow for the creation of truly walkable mixed-use communities rather than just sprawl.

So where do we draw the line on regulations? I suggest that we skip the questions of more regulations or fewer regulations, and get to work creating better ones.

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.



A portion of the future land use map for Walton County, courtesy Walton County and Matrix Design Group, waltoncountyplanupdate.com