

A Letter to the New Residents of South Walton

Words of wisdom from "The Class of 2004"

By Mark Schnell



Dear Class of 2017: Just in case you think this is a letter to a high school or college graduating class, I will go ahead and explain myself. When I refer to The Class of 2017, I'm talking about the wave of new residents currently crashing on the shores of South Walton and spreading across the sand.

To all of you, I say welcome to South Walton!

Granted, nobody else is likely to call you The Class of 2017. But, for some reason, I habitually refer to the rather sizable group of people who moved here in or around 2004 as "The Class of 2004," and it seems like it's finally time to acknowledge a new class.

I'm part of The Class of 2004, along with my wife and daughter. To some people, that makes me a Johnny-come-lately who was not around for "the good old days." To others, I'm a longtime local. It's all relative, I suppose.

And the year of the class is slightly arbitrary. Some arrived in 2003 or 2005, but all arrived just in time for the roaring economy and heady days of that memorable, yet ultimately doomed real estate boom. New arrivals in 2017 are part of another real estate boom, but the history of this one is still being written.

Many members of The Class of 2004 did exactly what we did: they left behind a life in another place to chase their dream of living at the beach. Some were designers, like myself, who suddenly found themselves as busy as ever (and that was

a pleasant change from the uncertainties of the post-9/11 months). Others sold real estate. And oh, did they sell some real estate! Houses were being flipped at a remarkable rate, and for higher and higher prices. It all seemed too good to be true, and of course, it was. But, for those few years, you could find The Class of 2004 at the bar at Borago (back when it was in Grayton) toasting the latest architecture commission or the latest real estate closing.

The area has changed a lot since then. That's just what happens, especially in a beautiful place that was finally "discovered" in a big way.

When we arrived, the Grand Boulevard Publix and the WaterColor Publix opened, giving 30A easy and quick access to groceries for the first time. The hospital and high school were both less than two years old. The St. Joe Company was the proverbial "800 pound gorilla" in the area, and they were building beautiful new communities: WaterColor was only a few years old, and WaterSound was just getting started. In its founding year, people had their first glimpses of the gleaming white buildings of the new kid on the block, Alys Beach. Even Seaside was still filling in. The site of the big Lyceum Gateway building was just a parking lot in 2004.

And South Walton will continue to change, much to the chagrin of many local residents and visitors. It's no longer the same place as when those of us in The Class of 2004 established our roots, but the more recent changes, and those ahead, will be great for some and disheartening for others.

As an urban designer and planner, I'm in the business of looking ahead. I don't have a crystal ball, but



Top Photo: A view of Pine Needle Way in WaterColor in 2004, where no houses were yet built, is now (bottom) lined with cottages and filled in with mature shrubbery. Photos by Mark Schnell

I understand (and help shape) how places grow and change, and I'm seeing some trend lines.

I sometimes feel like a doctor breaking bad news to a patient: I'm sorry, but short of an exceptionally tragic event, you simply cannot stop growth. You can lament it all

you want, but you are not actually accomplishing anything. And you can fight growth, and you might even slow it down for a little while, but you will not ultimately stop it. As long as there is value in the land

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Book Spotlight

“The New Pioneers: How Entrepreneurs are Defying the System to Rebuild the Cities and Towns of America” by J.P. Faber

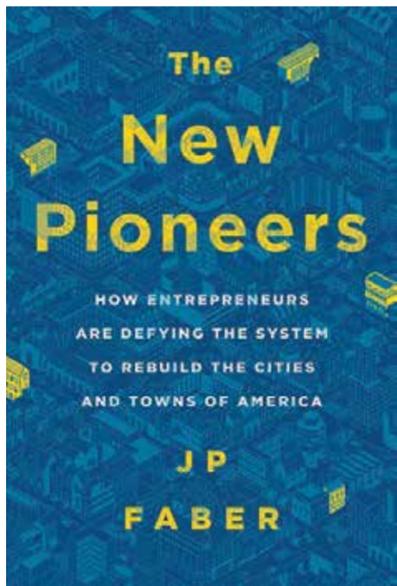
Written by award-winning editor and journalist J.P. Faber, “The New Pioneers” is the story of American entrepreneurs — millennials, immigrants, artists and beyond — working around obstacles to create wealth and revive cities across the nation. It’s an optimistic look at how we can best use local and national resources to simultaneously rebuild cities and jump-start our country’s small business economy — and Seaside, Fla., is prominently featured in the book as an example of that pioneer spirit and community growth.

Faber focuses on the positive, sustained growth of Seaside, with emphasis on “the economics of slow” alongside small and green living.

Excerpts:

Ask Robert Davis why he created Seaside, and he will tell you that it was to re-create the summer vacations of his childhood, when his parents would take him and his siblings down to the Alabama coast to stay in seaside cottages. It was a place where the world was palpable, where you walked and ran and swam and got covered in sand and salty water.

“We started with a shrimp shack,” says Davis. “It was a kind of a roadside attraction, since there was nothing for miles in either direction. We served boiled shrimp and cold beer. And when people stopped and asked what we were up to, I used it as an opportunity to tell the story of Seaside. Because that’s all we had to sell at that point, the story of the



community that we were going to build.”

Like the Seaside retailers who began in small spaces and gradually grew larger, the building of homes in Seaside proceeded incrementally, one piece at a time. It was almost as if the community began as a sketch, slowly coloring itself in.

It is the successional nature of Seaside that is most exemplary of lean principles. It is a foundation for both the intricate, organic nature of the build out and for the economic model that made it possible despite lean beginnings. It is a concept that Davis calls “patient capital.”

“The New Pioneers” (hardcover) is \$24.95 and is available at Sundog Books in Seaside.

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— and there’s plenty of that right now — there will be people who will build.

This isn’t all bad, of course. I was very happy to move to a place with grocery stores, a hospital, and a high school. We, like our friends and neighbors in The Class of 2004, have benefited financially from the growth in real estate and tourism. And some of the most beautiful communities in the country were built right here on 30A.

That last point is where I start to get concerned. Who will build the next great communities? (Remember, growth and change are coming, one way or another. It’s the quality that matters.) I see a lot of poorly designed subdivisions being built right now, but not much that actually enhances the area. Who will build the next Seaside? We need the private sector to step up, create great places, and make positive changes.

We also need the public sector to play a much bigger and better role. The Walton County Board of County Commissioners continues to react rather than do any real long-term planning. This is an ongoing tragedy for the community.

Years from now, Class of 2017, you will reminisce about the new Publix that opened — in Freeport! And you’ll probably note the brand new bridge over the Choctawhatchee Bay that doubles the capacity. And there’s a chance you’ll mention the completion of the Highway 331 expansion from two to four lanes. But I’m not holding my breath on that one. It might take another generation to finish it.

I’m not ready to predict any kind of near term boom in Freeport. But change is coming, and probably sooner than most people think.

Have you seen all of the commercial land for sale along Highway 331 for several miles north of the bridge? Those are the future strip malls, gas stations, fast food restaurants, and oil change shops. There are a few larger parcels that will become residential subdivisions. It won’t take long for all these new developments to generate a lot of traffic, which will force a slew of new traffic lights. That newly widened 331, with plenty of capacity and no traffic? Add strip malls and traffic lights, and it becomes just another traffic-choked suburban strip. Is that your vision for the future, Class of 2017?

I know this is a bleak picture, but this is a call to arms. Class of 2017, this is your time. Those of us in The Class of 2004 are still here and ready to help. But we collectively need to build places that are worthy of the beautiful natural environment and great communities that inspired all of us to move here in the first place.

It’s not too late for South Walton, and it’s definitely not too late for Freeport, but we need to start right now. Welcome to South Walton! Help us create a better future.

Sincerely,
The Class of 2004

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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