

Yes, We Need Infrastructure, But What Kind?

Be careful what you wish for

By Mark Schnell



“You are not stuck in traffic. You are traffic.” – *Anonymous*

There seems to be a growing consensus among the locals of 30A that we need more infrastructure. It’s become a rallying cry of sorts. There isn’t a Facebook rant that goes by without some mention of infrastructure.

All of the proverbial torches and pitchforks are directed at our Walton County commissioners. This is rightly so, because they have not been able to keep the infrastructure up to speed with the growth in the south part of the county. (And, as I frequently remind people, the growth is coming whether people like it or not.)

But this discussion remains extremely vague. Exactly what kind of infrastructure are the citizens demanding? I hear a lot of different viewpoints, so maybe everyone has a different idea of what’s needed. Or maybe your average citizen knows something is wrong, but doesn’t really know how to solve these problems. However, many seem very certain that we absolutely, without question, 100 percent need more parking or more turn lanes or new pedestrian overpasses. As an urban designer, I’m not fond of these particular solutions. But I’m happy my fellow citizens are interested in the subject.

Of course, experts have failed our communities enough times over the years that it’s natural for people to try to take matters into their own hands. The civil engineering, traffic



An area northeast of the 30A/395 intersection was recently cleared to begin the construction of turn lanes and the addition of a traffic light. Photo by Mark Schnell

engineering and planning professions have, in many cases, failed us miserably. Most civil engineers have never found a problem they couldn’t “solve” by widening a road. And the politicians obviously aren’t helping.

When it comes to infrastructure, we need to be very, very careful what we wish for. When you are aggravated about traffic and demand a solution, you are likely to get much more than you bargained for. The people making these decisions will not find the subtle solution that keeps the charm of 30A intact. They will ram a superhighway down our throats and destroy our neighborhoods.

Of course I’m exaggerating, but not by much. And this is not really a laughing matter. This kind of infrastructure overkill will happen if we aren’t very careful.

Let’s take a look at the two most talked-about issues, and what needs to happen:

ISSUE: TRAFFIC

There are a few areas along 30A that experience minor backups, with the worst of them (occasional major backups) happening at the 30A/395 intersection. When I say minor, I’m not trying to downplay the frustration, which I experience as well. But this isn’t Atlanta, folks. We don’t need to overreact and destroy everything we love about 30A. And congestion is actually a sign of success. As strange as it sounds, there are places that would love to have the congestion that comes with being a popular and beloved place.

What people are demanding: The citizens asked for a solution at the 30A/395 intersection. And after many years, it’s now happening in the form of turn lanes and a traffic light. Construction has started, and it already looks like overkill. Instead of simply adding a traffic light, and maybe one turn lane, we are getting

a big intersection with a median, an island, multiple turn lanes and 11-foot-wide lanes (the same size as highway lanes). It’s a big city solution in a small town setting. And the land swap that keeps the bike path on the north side of 30A doesn’t help at all (the path should be on the south side, or preferably on both sides). In the case of Seaside, I’ve heard a surprising amount of support for a pedestrian bridge over 30A. (This is not to connect two parts of a building. This would be for all pedestrians in lieu of crossing at grade.) The complaint is that the pedestrians at street level slow down traffic. This is, of course, the point, and a positive thing. Seaside was designed explicitly to level the playing field for drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians. It’s a huge part of what makes the town so beloved and emulated. There may come a time when some minor measures

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TRENDS & TREASURES

Comfort Zone

Cozy clothing, warming drinks and tempting treats to fall for

By Sarah Murphy Robertson

As we enter the holiday season ahead, seek out these creature comforts in the form of comfy clothing materials, hot teas and tasty bites.

Here are a few you should definitely embrace from Seaside merchants this fall.

Mercantile

A Soft Touch

The Barefoot Dreams Wrap is the ultimate in coziness. In fact, this may just be the softest piece of clothing you'll ever own. It's lightweight enough to be worn year-round, but especially ideal for cooler, chillier evenings. Available in five colors and in two sizes (S/M and L/XL) for \$99.



Photo courtesy Mercantile

Bud & Alley's Pizza Bar + Trattoria

Launching Lunch into Fall

Chef Phil at Bud & Alley's Pizza Bar + Trattoria has a salad foodies will "fall" in love with. Snuggle up to a warm and colorful Grilled Squash Salad that celebrates the deliciousness of the fall season. It is a marvelous medley of grilled squash, radicchio, currants,

hazelnuts, yogurt, chili and salsa verde. This dish is a beautiful and healthy way to welcome autumn to your belly. Enjoy it while gazing upon the gorgeous view of the Gulf just beyond the Coleman Pavilion and this meal will become priceless.



Photo by Zach Keaton

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are needed (possibly limiting the at-grade crossing points and/or adding a traffic light), but in the meantime, don't fix that which is not really broken. A pedestrian bridge is honestly a terrible idea.

Better solutions: The best way to preserve the character of 30A while accommodating all of the people and traffic is to get people out of their cars. You can add all the lanes you want, but they will just fill up with more traffic. (There's even a name for this in planning and engineering circles: induced demand.) We need to build bike lanes, sidewalks, and transit. They are much more efficient, and they fit much better with the small town scale of 30A. And the efficiencies of automated vehicles could improve the situation without massive highway-like expansion of our roads.

ISSUE: PARKING

Just as people hate sitting in traffic, they hate circling and circling to find a parking space. (When both happen in a single trip, we are entering into road rage territory.) This happens sometimes in Seaside, of course, but it's not because there is not enough parking. As I frequently

note, none of us have a God-given right to a parking space. If the businesses are full of happy patrons, and the residents and renters can park near their homes, then there's not really a parking problem. Just because you can't find a parking space right in front of your destination does not mean we need a massive regulatory intervention (requiring more parking on private land). People also complain that there is inadequate parking for beach accesses and certain businesses, especially restaurants.

What people are demanding: People want more parking, and there are certainly places where it would be helpful in small amounts. But this, like the drive to increase capacity through wide lanes and turn lanes, can easily drift into dangerous territory. Thanks to my many years of practicing urban design, it's very clear that the places people love, including the 30A corridor, are so lovable in part because they lack giant parking lots. The communities of 30A are intimate and walkable. In contrast, parking lots are not pleasant places, and they severely hamper walking and biking. Again, people need to be very careful what they wish for. Adding parking lots makes us much more like our neighboring

Amavida

Coffee & Tea

Season's Steepings

Tea lovers will find many fun new flavors to sip at Amavida this season. Keep an eye out as they are adding new selections all the time. Silver Needle by Rishi Tea is sourced from the remote Yunnan Province of China. This tea's delicately sweet flavor has a fruity aroma and is a rare variety beloved by tea connoisseurs.



Photo courtesy Rishi Tea

Perspicacity

Love for Layers

Snuggle into a blend comprised of merino wool in this shawl vest from Michael Stars this season. Pictured here in gorgeous oxide, it is available in a toasty oatmeal shade as well. These beauties are the perfect choice for layering over long-sleeves for a versatile yet trendsetting look. Available in sizes XS-L for \$229.



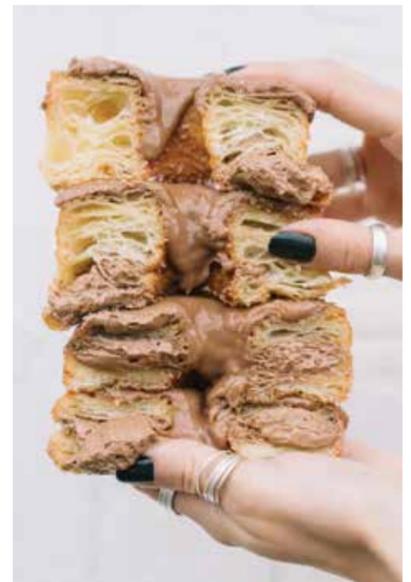
Photo by Sarah Murphy Robertson

Five Daughters Bakery

Baked Greats

Speaking of layers, the Five Daughters Bakery's version of a cronut is this insanely delicious hybrid of a croissant and a doughnut. They take up to three days to craft and once cooked, the 100-layer donut is rolled

in sugar, filled with cream, and topped with a heavenly glaze. While this may start out as a special treat, you're going to find yourself back for more of these baked "greats" again and again.



Photos courtesy Five Daughters Bakery

cities to the east and west, neither of which exhibits the kind of environment that most fans of 30A desire. It wasn't always that way for those communities. As the old Joni Mitchell song noted, "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot." Let's not make the same mistake.

Better solutions: For both beaches and businesses, add a few parallel spaces in selected locations in the existing rights-of-way, but do not build or require huge parking lots. (To the county's credit, they are already doing some of this. The new parallel spaces in Grayton Beach work well and look good.) More importantly, encourage transportation that doesn't need significant parking, or preferably none at all. When you arrive for dinner in Seaside via a ride share service or taxi, you don't need to park. Transit is another mode that doesn't need parking (beyond a transit stop). And let's encourage people to ride their bikes. Obviously, parking a bike requires much less space than a car. But the county needs to improve the bike infrastructure with additional sidewalks, bike paths, and/or protected bike lanes. And rather than build parking lots, let's support the Seaside Institute's exploration of automated vehicles

through the 30A Mobility Project. As with a ride share service or taxi, an automated vehicle would not need to park in the immediate vicinity of your destination. It moves on to the next rider or parks in a shared pool of parking that's away from businesses, residences and beaches.

So next time you post on Facebook about the need for more infrastructure, please consider what kind of infrastructure is needed. Most importantly, it should not damage the overall quality of place we enjoy here on 30A. The solutions need to be appropriate for this remarkable place. You didn't move to or visit South Walton for wide streets and giant parking lots. If you are anything like me, you are here for the opposite: beautiful small-scale beach towns along a slow and narrow beach road. So let's keep the pressure on our political leaders to improve our infrastructure, but let's also be very careful what we demand. 🌱

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.