

URBAN DESIGN

Creating a Place for Kids of All Ages

As snowbird season and spring break show, SEASIDE has an appeal that spans generations

By Mark Schnell



Local residents of South Walton experience seasons differently than most places. We basically have our own calendar.

Our year starts with snowbird season, when our friends from the Great White North enjoy our mild winter weather and cheaper rents. On March 1, the madness of spring break begins. We sometimes call the gap between spring break and summer our "stroller season" for all of the visiting families with children too young for school. Our summer is more tied to the school schedule than the earth's journey around the sun, because our visitors arrive after Memorial Day but the crowds thin out in early August. A second round of stroller season begins again in August after most kids have gone back to school. Fall is known for perfect weather, festivals, and empty nester couples. The time between Thanksgiving and Christmas is the last gasp of the nearly extinct "off-season" that once lasted much of the year. And weddings seem to happen all year long.

The transitions between these South Walton "seasons" are where it gets interesting. Each transition has its own characteristics. Sometimes the changes happen fast, like when we go from very few visitors in mid-December to the extremely busy week between Christmas and New Year's. But sometimes the changes happen slowly, and almost imperceptibly, such as when the



It's typical to see multi-generational families enjoying Seaside, like Mike and Lee Vinson with their son Scott, daughter-in-law Hope and their grandson Sawyer, from Montgomery, Ala. Photo by Wendy O. Dixon

summer season slowly cranks up in late May.

For as many years as I've lived in South Walton (now going on 14), I've never really grown accustomed to the abrupt change from snowbird season to spring break. It happens every year, and yet it somehow still catches me off guard.

As I write this, I'm sitting in a house that fronts County Road 30A in Old Seagrove. It's the last of the busiest weeks of spring break, and I'm watching a constant stream of teens and pre-teens on bicycles traveling to and from Seaside. Nearly all of them seem to be having a great time, or at least it sounds

like it from all the whooping and hollering. The ones old enough to drive pass by in their parents' SUV packed with all the friends they can fit, but they are not the ones that interest me. The ones biking and walking are free in a way that may not happen much in their lives back at home. They are not isolated and stuck in a car-dominated environment. They don't need a "taxi driver" parent every time they leave the house or the cul-de-sac. And that might just be why they beg their parents to come back here every year for their vacations.

Parents choose where to raise their kids based on many factors.

Two of them are schools and safety. Our society could certainly do a better job of incorporating schools into pedestrian- and bike-friendly mixed-use places. But these kids are missing out on the education that comes from exploring and experiencing the world on their own. And the cul-de-sac suburbs, with their high-speed arterials, are hardly the safest environment. Kids rarely even walk or bike to school any more, often because parents fear for their safety.

This sense of freedom applies to the snowbirds, too. Sure, most of them can drive (although maybe "drive" deserves quotation marks, because 10 miles-per-hour may not count as actual driving). But the snowbirds (and seniors who are full-time residents) don't always want to drive, and sometimes they are no longer allowed. The snowbirds and other seniors I know love to walk or ride a bicycle (or sometimes a tricycle) around Old Seagrove and Seaside. It's a way to get some exercise, get out in the fresh air, meet people and run into friends. And many seniors love being in a high-energy place, even if they are just watching the action from the sidelines (or the sidewalk). In a world of traffic, aggressive drivers, and a world that seems to move faster and faster (for all of us), it's a real pleasure for many seniors to take a stroll rather than drive. Just like for those teens and pre-teens on spring break, there's something fun and liberating about it. It's just what the doctor ordered, and sometimes literally so.

Despite this, our society often sends our senior citizens to live in the middle of nowhere. It's extremely rare, in my experiences, to find a senior living facility anywhere near a walkable mixed-use environment. And those living independently are often priced out of walkable mixed-

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Recently remodeled, this impressive three-story plus roof deck town home is situated in Ruskin Place. The home overlooks the beautiful park area in central Seaside where boutique stores and art galleries surround the tranquil tree lined green space.

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Make everlasting memories at Vista Del Mar, located on the coveted street Seaside Avenue, near Central Square and the beach. The home has just undergone some major updates and renovations in 2018, making it even more inviting. A classic antebellum plantation-style home with plenty of room and porches on every level including terrific views of the gulf. *"We really enjoyed our stay in this very spacious and comfortable home. There was plenty of room for two families and the gulf view porch deck, so nice to have!"* — Vista Del Mar Guest Survey 2017

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Trumanesque

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from Weir's book is that its producer, Christof, was 29 years old when he sold his concept for what would become "The Truman Show" to multimedia giant Omnicom. The star of the show was named Truman Burbank by Christof — who said, "We will make him a True Man." His last name, Burbank, was for the location of the studio in California where they would film Truman's studio and home.

"The Truman Show" is part comedy and part drama. The movie dances on the line of science fiction and brings it into the modern-day dreamlike fairytale town created by Seaside's town founders. It is a bubble that extends east and west along Scenic Highway 30A to create an unbelievably charming life for its year-round inhabitants — and, it is real.

While residents don't live in a domed world of 5,000 hidden cameras with computer-controlled weather; and, while each friend and neighbor that we encounter on Seaside's pedestrian pathways isn't an actor, we are still unwittingly the focus of our own audiences, the ones we procure as hundreds, thousands and millions of our own fans who tune in round-the-clock to the realities depicted in our social media posts. There, on that virtual stage, our followers view the decisions we make, the products and places we love alongside our triumphs and heartbreaks - just as audiences did to Truman.

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use places. Such communities are often fairly expensive because they are both desirable and scarce. We haven't created enough walkable mixed-use urbanism, and our parents and grandparents are some of the people who are suffering for it. And don't forget, we'll all be in their shoes at some point.

So maybe that transition between snowbird season and spring break isn't as jarring as I've come to believe. They have more in common than one might think.

And sadly, beyond the limited number of places that are pedestrian- and bike-friendly, we've failed both of these groups. If we are not creating places that empower our children and seniors, and improve their lives, what are we creating?

This is also a wake up call for those of us here in South Walton. We need to make sure that this is always a place where children and seniors feel comfortable riding a bike or taking a walk. That will be a more difficult task than it sounds, but without question, it's worth it.

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.

The REP Performs in SEASIDE® "The Prince and the Pauper"



The Seaside Repertory Theatre (The REP) actors perform "The Prince and the Pauper" on the Seaside Amphitheater stage. Left to right: REP actors Katie Gulak, Brook Stetler, Casey Trejo and Kyle Walter



REP actors Katie Gulak, Kyle Walter and Casey Trejo

Stories by the Sea



REP actors Katie Gulak and Casey Trejo act out stories created by their eager audience during Stories by the Sea.