

URBAN DESIGN

Revisiting the 30A/395 Intersection

Everyone is happy that car traffic moves smoothly, but that's not the only measure of success

By Mark Schnell



The recent expansion of the 30A/395 intersection is one of the most impactful infrastructure changes I've seen for this area in my 14 years of living in South Walton.

And for me it hits close to home: I've lived within three blocks of it for the last decade. Now that we've had a few months to use the intersection, it's a good time to evaluate the changes.

Before I get to my thoughts on the subject, I need to note that the changes to the intersection are not complete. The design you see today will change in fairly significant ways in the future, although there is no estimated date of completion. The portion of 30A immediately east of the intersection will shift to the north by roughly 10 feet, necessitating a curve in the street so it can connect with the existing street alignment to the east and west. And the portion of 395 just north of the intersection will gain a median that divides the northbound and southbound lanes. These changes cannot be completed until some additional utility work is completed.

The completed intersection will continue to have the same number of lanes and will function largely the same. So while there are more changes coming, it's not too early to evaluate the existing changes.

Also, I'd like to commend Chance Powell and the team at Walton County for their work on this. They are doing an excellent job within the parameters given by the Board of County Commissioners. These changes were heavily influenced by



The recently expanded 30A/395 intersection aims to improve the congested flow of car traffic. Photo by Wendy O. Dixon

the dysfunctional politics of Walton County. To the degree that I am disappointed in the results, it's due to the commissioners rather than the county staff.

The question on most people's minds, of course, is this: Does the revised intersection work as intended? Does it move enough car traffic to prevent the backups that plagued it in recent years? The short answer is yes, it moves car traffic very efficiently. This came as a surprise to many skeptics in the community. I'm actually not surprised, because this is a significant intervention. I described it in a previous column as a "big city solution," and that's exactly what it is. And, like a big city, it will move traffic well until growth in the area overwhelms it. That could happen sooner than you might think, but we should at least have several years of relief for drivers. At that point, when the backups return, there will likely be calls for

additional changes: more lanes, pedestrian/bike bridges, etc.

For many, if not most people, the intersection is simply a part of their drive to work, the grocery store, and so on. It's not the center of their neighborhood. Therefore, with only a few exceptions, people seem to be happy that traffic flows through that intersection. I'm even happy about that part of it. I use the intersection on a nearly daily basis, and it's no fun to sit in traffic.

But is the unimpeded flow of cars the only measure of success for this or any other intersection? I argue that it should not be the only measure — not by a long shot. In all other ways, the intersection is a step backwards for South Walton, and Seagrove was the sacrificial lamb.

Despite some serious design flaws, including a lack of amenities that make a street great (street trees and other landscape, low scale street light-

ing, etc.), Highway 30A has always had at least one thing going for it: it's a small scale street that is still relatively pedestrian- and bike-friendly. (And, to clarify, the portions of 30A through some of the New Urban towns are excellent. The portions through Seacrest, Seagrove, Dune Allen, etc. are not up to par.)

The old version of the 30A/395 intersection was certainly flawed, but at least it was smaller in scale, slower in speed, and essentially made cyclists and pedestrians into the kings/queens of the road. Many places in the U.S. are trying desperately to even the playing field for cyclists and pedestrians versus cars. They are installing bike lanes and sidewalks everywhere they can. They are trying to slow down the cars. We just did the opposite with one of our most important intersections. We tipped the balance of power at the 30A/395 intersection towards cars.

Right after the intersection was fully operational, I was disappointed to see Facebook posts gleefully showing a pack of cyclists waiting their turn while drivers cruised through the intersection. The tone of the posts was basically, "Good. They needed to be put in their place." Don't get me wrong: it's perfectly reasonable that pedestrians and cyclists wait their turn at that intersection. But we lost a huge opportunity. We could have built a pedestrian and bike environment that more resembles Amsterdam or Copenhagen (or many other international cities that have prioritized those modes of transportation). Instead, we became more like the car-dominated suburbs of America.

That's a dangerous path and a slippery slope. Cars now move much faster through the intersection, and it's absolutely true that speed kills. There will likely be crashes that result just from the higher speeds. And the Board of County Commissioners made a deal that prevents a bike path on the south side of 30A for at least 10

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Great Southern Café Was Moved To Please

Restaurant building has a storied past

By Pratt Farmer

It's only fitting that the building known as the Great Southern Café serves up, among other things, delectable egg dishes. Maybe a tribute to the buildings' origin in Chattahoochee, Fla. near Two Egg. Yes, there is actually a little community by that name. It has no government, no taxes, no service and no city-like attitude. At least that's what they claim on their website. Two Egg is proudly isolated from the world. Chattahoochee, Fla. is right up the road from Sneads and a stone's throw from Two Egg. You get the idea. The building, which actually was one of the oldest structures in Chattahoochee is now the Great Southern Café. It has an interesting history for sure. If you have eaten in the restaurant in the heart of Seaside's Central Square you probably recognized that it looks like it was once someone's house. That's because it was. The Florida cracker-style house design was popular in the early 1900s. It's wide covered porches, tin roof and large windows offered some relief from the hot summers here. Thousands were built across the state.

Legend has it that in 1988, or thereabouts, several houses in Chattahoochee were to be practically given away to make room for a road project. A young couple had become enchanted with Seaside and wanted to live here. But they wanted to forego architects and builders. So they set out to convince town founders, Robert and Daryl Davis, to allow them to actually move one of those houses to a lot on East Ruskin Street. And they did. It is worth noting that Two Egg is 98 miles northeast of Seaside and Chattahoochee is a little farther; a long way to drag a house. Ducky Johnson, a well-known mover of just about anything (and still is), was chosen for the task. After many weeks of preparation and a lot of back and forth with local and state officials at both ends of the route, Johnson's boys put the building on a platform, removed a portion of the roof and transported it at night. Moving almost at the pace of a snail, it made for long nights, safely arriving several days after it began its trek to Seaside. The young couple had a Seaside home, finally.

This is where the story gets interesting. A year or two passed and Seaside was becoming known. People were naturally being attracted to a little community that had that "down-



Originally built in Chattahoochee, Fla., this home was moved to Seaside and, after a little tender loving care, became what is now Great Southern Café in Seaside. Photos courtesy Deborah and Ian Ralowsky, original owners of the cottage

home" feeling about it. But it needed more food and beverage offerings. Bud & Alley's restaurant was here, Dawson's Yogurt might have been. Knowing the house on East Ruskin Street was for sale, a couple of employees in Seaside convinced the Davises to buy the little cottage from the young couple and move it to Central Square. They just knew that food and maybe a few wine selections would be a hit. And once again the little house was on the move, and The Rose Cafe opened to wide acclaim. Well, at least people from as far away as Grayton Beach knew there was a new restaurant in town.

After a year, Billy McConnell, a noted restaurateur and some would say "provocateur" from Birmingham, Ala., was convinced he needed to lease The Rose. It didn't take long for McConnell and his business partner to seize the

opportunity. They changed the name to Shades. And McConnell soon became a loveable fixture around town. The gregarious McConnell knew how to run restaurants and make customers

happy. It was a winning combination. He reflects back on those early days speaking fondly of the "ghosts."

"We would be in Shades late at night getting ready for the next day and it wasn't uncommon to see pitchers, dishes and the occasional cup fly off the shelf," he recalls. "One balmy summer night an employee and I walked out the front door and just as I was about to put the key in the lock, a fierce cold wind almost knocked us both down. I always thought one of the ghosts either wanted back in the house or maybe intended to go home with me that night."

Shades was eventually sold. Later, chef and restaurateur Jim Shirley bought the restaurant and renamed it Great Southern Café, paying homage to the building's rich and storied history, and reflecting a menu that is truly Southern in every way. If you are having a cocktail at the bar or a sumptuous meal in one of the rooms in the house, think nothing of it should your menu find its way to the floor or to the table next to you. Rumor has it the ghosts like the tables to be set a certain way. Bon appetite. ☺



Great Southern Café as it stands today, serves award-winning food and beverages in Central Square in Seaside. Photo by Collis Thompson

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years. That would have helped pedestrians and cyclists avoid the conflicts with car traffic altogether at the intersection.

Many residents and visitors simply won't care because they don't ever walk or bike anywhere, but they should care. Everyone, and especially the county commissioners, should sit in my home office facing 30A in Seagrove for a while and watch the impressive numbers of cyclists and pedestrians pass by. An environment that's conducive to walking and biking is a big part of our community's appeal. It makes this a great place to live and visit. We need to encourage more people to bike and walk along 30A. Every one of them who decides that it's too dangerous or uncomfortable will get back into their cars and clog up the streets. And, even worse, we risk the decline that happens to a community when you allow cars to be king.

I don't want to sound too alarmist about one intersection, but I'm already hearing calls for more traffic lights to facilitate car traffic in other stretches of 30A. This one intersection is not a total disaster (it's actually better than I thought it would be), and the traffic jams were a serious

issue, but it's still a step in the wrong direction in many ways. A smaller intervention (just a traffic light with no realignment of the right-of-way, and maybe one turn lane) could have been just as effective with less impact to other modes of transportation. The bike path should be on both sides of the street. We could have included street trees and other landscape, pedestrian-scale streetlights, and other features that make a street more comfortable and beautiful for everyone, including drivers. (Hopefully some of these items will be included in the final design.)

At its best, a street is much more than just a conduit for car traffic. Streets, and by extension the intersections of streets, are places in and of themselves. We all know a great street when we see it. Here are a few of my favorites in the U.S.: Commonwealth Avenue in Boston, Mass., NW 23rd Avenue in Portland, Ore., King Street in Alexandria, Va., and Valencia Street in San Francisco, Calif., to name just a few. These streets are attractive places with high demand for commercial spaces and residential units. They are enjoyable places, whether you walk, drive, or just sit at a sidewalk café. Highway 30A and County Road 395 could be great streets, but in many areas they are far from great right now.

The best feeder road intersection along 30A is now the 30A/393 intersection. It's close to a textbook example of how to make an intersection into a good place (and it could be even better with a few minor changes).

The view down southbound 393 is the Gulf of Mexico. It's a great terminated vista. I'd love to see the county buy the house at the end of 395 if it ever comes up for sale, and then demolish it and convert it into a public park. People on 395 should have that same view (it would actually be better than 393 due to the elevation). Thanks largely to Gulf Place and Shunk Gulley, the 393 intersection is full of life: people eating and drinking at outdoor café tables, and people walking to shops, restaurants, and the beach. At 30A and 395, the Viridian condominiums and Surfing Deer restaurant do a good job of addressing the streets. However, I wish the Seagrove Village Market would have been turned 90 degrees to place more of the outdoor porch seating along 395, and I'd love to see a shop or café on the east side of 395 to complete the intersection. 30A and 393 have street trees, parallel parking, and a plaza at the intersection. 30A and 395 have none of these. And finally, pedestrians and cyclists are still the kings and queens at the 30A/393 intersection. Cars still move slow enough to make

it relatively safe and comfortable.

And finally, this might be the most unfortunate aspect of the changes to the 30A/395 intersection: it is just another isolated reaction to a problem. The county continues to play "whack-a-mole" with infrastructure: make changes in one location only when people part start screaming, then move on to the next. Where's the plan for all of 30A and the feeder roads? Considering the rapid rate of growth, how are we going to move people through these corridors in the next few decades? It won't be good enough to add turn lanes and traffic lights in selected places. We need to think about mobility in South Walton as a complete system.

We have the ability to create streets that are both great places and effective at moving people through our community. There are plenty of good examples out there, and even some here in our back yard. The time to get started is now. ☺

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.