

Solving the Traffic Problem in Orange Beach

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Roads are the lifeblood of a community, moving prosperity, maintaining economic flow. The ones in Orange Beach do not perform well, especially during the peak-tourist season. We must find a better way to move traffic or we must reduce development, because the countdown is ticking for a summertime solution.

When government pours money into local economies jobs are created, according to a stimulus theory espoused by John Maynard Keynes. In Orange Beach development has outpaced infrastructure, requiring government to come in. They are investing millions-of-dollars in the local economy, re-balancing the development-to-infrastructure equation, spurring economic growth, and alleviating congestion on our roads.

Visitors do not care if it's the State's road, it passes through our town and City Council must answer for what is perceived to be poor planning on the part of elected officials. In recent memory, traffic complaints were innumerable, prompting Mayor Kennon to put the Governor's telephone number on the electronic sign in front of City Hall, telling people to call Montgomery.

"All I know is we need a road through the State Park," said Mayor Tony Kennon in an interview with John Mullen of the Lagniappe, putting commerce ahead of environmental impact, supporting development of the natural resource the State Park was created to protect.

The Gulf Restoration Project lawsuit settlement (\$53 Million) prohibits building a road across the State Park for the next 20 years, according to the Lagniappe. Mayor Kennon is frustrated that officials from Orange Beach were not consulted prior to the settlement, acknowledging the settlement virtually erased any chance to build a direct route from the Beach Express to the Beach Road for a generation.

"That was part of the settlement that was able to get the lawsuit settled and us moving forward," said Chris Blankenship, Commissioner of Alabama's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' (DCNR).

We must plan an alternative route, going east from the Beach Express, skirting around the State Park. The city disavows any responsibility for traffic problems on State roads, saying it is not a local issue but one for the State of Alabama, arguing the revenue sent by the beach community is supporting their General Fund, implying the State should repatriate dollars to solve the beach's traffic problem.

At some point the beach community will own up to the fact that locally-approved developments fueled this expansion, causing traffic congestion. Once partial guilt is accepted, solving the traffic issue becomes a partnership with the State, letting them provide input on developments with the city supply feedback on infrastructure. Both sides

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discussing additional-developer fees to pay for road improvements, understanding that fee increases for the developers are not going to go down well.

Funding is always a key issue in Orange Beach because we treasure our reserves. The new school being built on Canal Road is a good example of the thought process, getting someone else to pony-up \$14.7 million for our children's school was a stroke of negotiated genius, but now that everyone in the county has seen the jet-sweep, evaluating different strategic options is our only choice.

Sain Associates wrote Orange Beach's traffic counts. For a typical summer weekend we had 1796 cars per hour come down the Foley Beach Express, turning onto Canal Road (SR-180). On the Beach Road we had 2436 vehicles per hour down SR-182, according to documents on the city's old website. Obviously the major holidays like Memorial Day, Independence Day and Labor Day generate more traffic, but you get the idea. Development has outgrown capacity, tarnishing Orange Beach's image.

For the best possible traffic flow, making all the arteries five lanes, matching the capacities on every passageway is the common-sense approach. Finding the funds to pay for it is easy, but whose funds will be tapped is another question.

Arguing strongly against a "free bridge" for Orange Beach, because it only benefits a few people in the State is espoused by a couple of political groups. "Ending the push for a \$30 million Government Bridge to the Gulf Coast and allowing a public-private partnership to solve that problem would be a great place to start. As such, there is no justification for shaking more money out of Alabama families and businesses. Alabama's transportation woes can be solved without a net tax increase, encouraging public-private partners rather than competing with them," said Grover Norquist, President of Americans for Tax Reform, a non-profit taxpayer advocacy group, and Marty Connors, Chairman of the Alabama Center Right Coalition.

Mayor Kennon told Fox10 News, "You can't stop the growth. It's coming whether you like it or not." Are the constituents comfortable, knowing their City Council has an insatiable appetite for big developments and the dollars they bring?

In the playbook, Orange Beach officials have eaten up a lot of clock with Town Halls, inviting Montgomery to show its hand, promising a bridge across Wolf Bay to County Road 20, promising a bridge to the west of the Beach Express, promising five lanes down Canal Road, giving residents hope that the traffic nightmare will soon be over.

Not so fast. Environmentalists, Americans for Tax Reform, and Alabama Center Right Coalition will certainly file separate actions in Federal Court, moving to impede the proposed bridges, stating various ideological reasons, possibly taking years to settle.

I suggest an unpopular approach, studying the consequences of local re-zoning, putting a moratorium on development until Council can determine what level of fees are right for infrastructure compensation, leveraging the developers' purse versus the City's ability to assess premium fees for ambitious projects. We must find a better way to move traffic or we must reduce development, because the countdown is ticking for a summertime solution.

ENDS.