

Overtourism in Orange Beach

1000 words

Rauf Bolden, Orange Beach

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Overtourism is like water, proportionately increasing with the lanes you give it. The impact of overtourism's traffic in Orange Beach was never anticipated. Is it too much to ask City Council, Community Development, and the Planning Commission to publish their 2030 Plan for growth, replacing the old Horizon 2020 Plan?

"In short, overtourism occurs when there are too many visitors to a particular destination. 'Too many' is a subjective term, of course, but it is defined in each destination by local residents, hosts, business owners and tourists. When rent prices push out local tenants to make way for vacation rentals, that is overtourism. When narrow roads become jammed with tourist vehicles – these are all signs of overtourism," according to a report in Responsible Travel (<https://www.responsiblevacation.com/copy/what-is-overtourism>).

Where is the off ramp for Orange Beach? Continually hiding behind the rhetoric, "They can build [condos] by right," arguing we cannot stop the growth, because Orange Beach will face litigation. This is the city's defensive shield, blaming the debilitating traffic from construction-driven growth and unplanned infrastructure on zoning rights.

Archaic zoning laws, passed decades ago, place Orange Beach in legal jeopardy if they restrict zoning on grandfathered properties, enabling overtourism to thrive in a booming economy. In 2008 the Taxable Lodging Rentals were \$4,268,949 versus the Taxable Lodging Rentals of \$23,091,793 in 2018, according to a report from the Citizen and Visitors Bureau in an email. This is an impressive increase in lodging rentals of 540% over ten years, obviously generating substantial tax revenues for the city.

I do not expect to see a revolt in Orange Beach with protesters shouting, "Tourist go home," as happened on the streets of Barcelona, Venice and Dubrovnik. We need a bipartisan community plan for sustainable tourism, not a knee jerk reaction where local officials increase lodging taxes, and initiate road widening in a desperate attempt to quell tourist traffic.

Does Orange Beach need a comprehensive plan, looking forward to 2030, defining paths for community wellness, infrastructure, schools, churches, businesses, tourism, and the environment?

"The old plan [for 2020] was done during [Mayor] Russo's era [2006]. Should be revisited," said Lucy Hazebrook, a resident of Orange Beach in an email.

"The whole county needs a comprehensive plan for growth. Both Orange Beach and Gulf Shores desperately need a plan for growth. Robert Craft I trust. Terrible Tony [Kennon] No," said Brenda Hancock, a resident of Baldwin County since 1961 in an email.

What is the plan for golf cart growth?

"My street corner [Bayou St. John at N. Bayshore Dr.] may be the golf cart busy corner [in Bear Point]. There is [sic] near misses frequently. Much is said about too young

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drivers, no adult supervision, etc. There are too many adults never stopping at stop signs and excessive speeding. Many so-called golf carts are far more than a golf cart,” said John Davis, a resident of Orange Beach in an email.

The travel industry dictates growth, thinking less about the impact. Is this a key issue?

“Too many people want to travel,” points out The Atlantic (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/06/crowds-tourists-are-ruining-popular-destinations/590767/>). ‘If seeing the world helps ruin it, should we stay home?’ asks The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/03/travel/traveling-climate-change.html>). And the Washington Post reminds readers (https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2019/06/17/were-age-overtourist-you-can-avoid-being-one-them/?utm_term=.bfc6d813fd79), ‘You can avoid being one of them.’ The overtourists, that is,” according to a report in Skift (<https://skift.com/2019/06/19/its-summer-and-everyone-is-writing-about-overtourism/>).

Orange Beach is not a tourist destination in the classical sense of visiting museums, seeing historic artifacts, or wandering through a medieval castle. We are a family destination with a beach, and our primary product is family safety. Keeping visitors safe whether in the water, on the beach, or dining out is the city’s anthem. In today’s world where gun violence litters every news cycle, safety is a primary concern for parents choosing a destination for their families.

Yet we still have problems with overtourism. City officials want to address the situation through infrastructure spending, like building a span across the Intracoastal Waterway to County Road 20 without limiting the number of beds for people to sleep in.

Mayor Tony Kennon told Fox10 News, “You can’t stop the growth. It’s coming whether you like it or not,” (<https://altoday.com/archives/25829-rauf-bolden-solving-the-traffic-problem-in-orange-beach>). As if growth cannot be managed, like is an apocalypse.

We get the sense from him that no independent views are wanted, solely legislating from Mayor Kennon’s gut instincts, decreasing setbacks, issuing construction permits as an inalienable right to contractors, because of their property’s zoning.

The Orange Beach City Council is poised to allow 677 new housing units (condos) on the Beach Road, underlining the premise of construction by zoning right, according to a report by John Mullen in the OBA Community Website (<https://obawebsite.com/oba-news/2019/orange-beach-council-considering-677-new-housing-units>).

Let’s do the math. If 677 new multi-bedroom units house eight people each, calculated out means 5,416 additional souls wandering the beach on any given day. That’s 1,354 additional vehicles, assuming each family unit only brings two cars. I ask my fellow residents, “Is this what you elected Mayor Tony Kennon to do?”

The scope of this article is not to stop tourism, nor to rail against Mayor Kennon’s business approach to government, but to ask for a written definition, describing the city’s long-term objectives regarding tourism, growth, and community happiness.

I propose this solution. A 270-day moratorium on all commercial building permits, allowing city officials time to hire planning professionals from multiple universities for policy studies on overtourism, assessing the impact of growth on our beach environment, and the wellness of our residential community.

ENDS.

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Disclosure: The views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in the text belong solely to the author. I have no business relationship with any company whose stock is mentioned in this article.