

## Handling the Multitudes: Traffic Control on Seawall Boulevard, 1911 - 1949

Since the early twentieth century, the Seawall and Seawall Boulevard have defined Galveston's beachfront. Each tourist season, multitudes trek to Galveston for beaches and Gulf bathing. They come mostly in cars, creating a constant challenge for authorities to ensure orderly traffic flow without endangering pedestrians. During earlier decades, city commissioners implemented a variety of methods, which drew local support and opposition, to keep traffic moving smoothly on the Boulevard.

The Rosenberg Library's Galveston and Texas History Center collects and preserves historical materials concerning tourism in Galveston. It is particularly interested in acquiring images of Seawall Boulevard, particularly ones that show the traffic tower installed in 1924. To donate photographs, please contact Peggy Dillard, Special Collections Manager, at [pdillard@rosenberg-library.org](mailto:pdillard@rosenberg-library.org).



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EASTER SUNDAY ON THE BOULEVARD, GALVESTON, TEXAS.  
*Automobiles and buggies at Easter on Seawall Boulevard, circa 1911 - 1915.  
Murdoch's Bathhouse (1911 - 1915, left). Breakers Bathhouse (1909 - 1915, right)*

Even before its dedication, automobiles were prominent on the Boulevard. September 9, 1911, saw the official dedication of Seawall Boulevard. A car carrying Oscar Colquitt, Governor of Texas, led a procession of automobiles, many of which belonged to and were driven by Galveston residents. The parade proceeded to 39th Street, then turned around, and ended at a grandstand erected at 22nd Street behind the Seawall. Governor Colquitt, the principal speaker, spoke on the city's recent accomplishments, including the Seawall, grade raising, and Boulevard. The parade of automobiles presaged problematic traffic congestion.

In the first years the Boulevard was opened, the thoroughfare was glutted with hundreds of cars. The Galveston Daily News, August 12, 1912, for example, noted that "cars bearing numbers from upstate cities rolled up and down the miles of brick-paved promenade." Safety was a principal concern since vehicles had to compete against large crowds milling along the Seawall.

In 1924, authorities installed a “traffic tower” with a signal in the middle of the Boulevard at 23rd Street to relieve traffic congestion. The Galveston Automobile Protective Association, which represented local motorists, called for its removal as a traffic hazard and its replacement with an overhead traffic signal. However, the city commissioner in charge of the police and fire departments declined the request. The traffic tower was later moved.

*Angled parking along the south side of the 2200 block of Seawall Boulevard, 1921.*



*Brush Electric Company's slogan sign (extreme left),  
Tango Terrace and National Hotel (middle), and Joyland Park (extreme right).*

Traffic diversion was another option. In August 1929, the Boulevard was closed for one afternoon and evening to traffic between 22nd and 25th streets, and automobiles were rerouted via Avenue Q. Crowds of tourists thronged the closed portion of the Seawall. The measure drew the support of Charles E. Barfield, president of the Galveston Beach Association, and G.K. Jorgenson, owner of the Crystal Palace Bathhouse. The Galveston Daily News, August 6, 1929, gave its endorsement: “Gone was the clamor of automobile horns, the odor of exhaust fumes and the very hazardous adventure of crossing from one side of the Boulevard to the other.”

In January 1936, the Galveston Coordination Committee was tasked with the issue of traffic diversion on Seawall Boulevard. The Coordination Committee appointed a special beach committee to review options for controlling traffic congestion and to make recommendations to Mayor Adrian Levy. The thinking was to create a special “amusement district” by closing Seawall Boulevard to traffic between 23rd and 25th Streets, but nothing came of this proposal.

Galveston’s city commission alternately utilized angled and parallel parking on Seawall Boulevard. The city began regulating parking on local streets in February 1916. During November 1924, commissioners approved a traffic ordinance which authorized angled parking along the Boulevard’s south side. However, the ordinance was immediately repealed in favor of another ordinance establishing a 2-hour parking limit from 19th to 29th streets between noon and midnight. The belief was that parallel parking was less of a traffic impediment than angled parking.

Parallel parking on the Boulevard between 22nd and 25th streets was tried on a trial basis from June 28 - July 4, 1939. The Galveston Beach Association, which represented beach businesses, opposed it on the grounds that it reduced parking for customers and tourists. Advocates, however, emphasized that it aided traffic flow. On July 6, 1939, city commissioners adopted an ordinance providing for parallel parking on

Seawall Boulevard between 19th and 29th Streets. The ordinance placed a 2-hour parking limit in this zone between noon and midnight.

In March 1940, city commissioners returned to angled parking. This practice continued until 1949 when parallel parking once again replaced it. City commissioners approved another ordinance in September 1949 authorizing angled parking along the Boulevard's north side between 7th and 27th streets.



*Angled parking returned to Seawall Boulevard in 1949.*

Parking meters were an unpopular method of traffic control. In 1936, city commissioners briefly considered their use but withdrew their consideration when faced with vehement opposition from local businesses. In June 1941, the county commissioners unanimously objected to the placement of parking meters along the Boulevard. They expressed their sentiments in a resolution prepared by the county attorney, which he presented to the board of city commissioners. The resolution stated the county commissioners' objection to the city's attempt to generate revenues from Seawall Boulevard, which belongs to Galveston County. County officials also considered parking meters to be potentially dangerous objects in hurricanes. Nevertheless, on July 10, 1941, city commissioners approved the installation of parking meters on the north side of Seawall Boulevard between 15th and 30th streets and the banning of parking on the south side. The county obtained a temporary restraining order in 56th District Court against the city and the company which contracted to install the meters. Higher courts upheld the temporary ban.

In recent years, of the various methods to establish traffic control, parking meters have been the most controversial. In 1998, Galveston voters rejected Proposition 41, which would have established paid parking on Seawall Boulevard. In 2004, voters approved Proposition 2, which required paid parking on Seawall Boulevard to be decided in a public election. A public election would be mandatory before the city council could implement paid parking. However, in May 2011, Galveston's voters overwhelmingly approved a beach access fee, which is tantamount to paid parking. The fee will generate revenues to fund beachfront enhancements.