

Economic Benefits of A Walkable Community

Summarized by Bill Ryan*

Walking is beneficial to people's health, to community vitality, and for the environment. According to a report prepared by the Maine Development Foundation, "walking improves community interaction as people are more likely to talk with neighbors and shop in local stores when they are walking through a community. It also provides easy, inexpensive and low-impact exercise that can improve the overall health of community residents. Walking instead of driving also protects environmental quality. Reducing vehicular emissions benefits plants, watersheds, and the health of wildlife and people alike."

Walkable communities also provide economic benefits. Some of these benefits are presented below.

Housing Values are Higher where its Walkable

A 1999 Study by the Urban Land Institute of four new pedestrian communities determined that homebuyers were willing to pay \$20,000 more for homes in walkable areas compared to similar homes in surrounding areas. New Urbanism (walkable) communities enjoy significantly higher housing values than traditional suburban developments. In a growing number of small and medium sized cities, downtown condominium and townhouse prices and apartment rents command a premium over comparable suburban, auto-dependant real estate.

Walkable Communities Attract "New Economy" Workers

In a 1998 report, Collaborative Economics, a Silicon Valley think tank, studied the relationship between the physical design of communities and dynamic elements of the new knowledge-driven, service-oriented economy. This new economy, with its smaller, decentralized firms, thrives on land use patterns similar to the towns of early industrial years, with city centers, corner stores and streetcar suburbs. Walkable downtowns offer a mix of restaurants, offices and housing that promote interaction. Interaction is key since the new economy thrives on accessibility, networking and creativity.

Walkable Communities are becoming a Business Relocation Alternative

The automobile has offered mobility and convenience for decades, but booming business centers like Atlanta and the Silicon Valley are showing how an overdependence on the car can gridlock economic development. As a result, some major firms around the country are advocating for pedestrian and transit-friendly development according to a 1999 report by the National Association of Local Government Environmental Professionals.

Walkable Communities Reduce Commuting Costs

Research in California has documented the high costs to workers and employers of commuting and traffic congestion. These costs include lost hours, fuel, traffic accidents and environmental damage. While traffic volume usually is not an issue in small towns and rural communities, travel time from long-distance commuting costs often are significant. According to Walkable Communities, Inc. walking remains the cheapest form of transportation. The construction of a walkable community provides the most affordable transportation system any community can plan, design, construct and maintain.

Walkable Communities Cost the Taxpayer Less

Regional and national business leaders say that low-density, discontinuous and automobile-dependent land use patterns can cause higher direct business costs and taxes. The federal Office of Technology Assessment estimates that a single house built on the urban fringe requires



Source: www.pedbikeimages.org / Dan Burden

\$10,000 more in public services than one built in the urban core.

Walkability Attracts Tourists

Communities and their downtowns that are walkable are capturing a greater share of tourist dollars as visitors are interested in experiencing community life. Places where visitors and residents alike feel community pride and activity are increasingly likely to be strong economically. Tourists coming to Vermont to walk and bicycle in the scenic, humanscale towns and compact, pedestrian-friendly town centers have proved to be an economic boon. Vermont Department of Tourism & Marketing's official website leads off inviting tourists to the state's walkable downtowns. Rutland is described as having bookstores that foster community, providing gathering places for area residents and visitors alike.

Walkable Communities Can Capture an Emerging "Lifestyle" Retail Market

Developers have recently recognized opportunities in walkable shopping centers that offer a "sense of place." Lifestyle centers (and "New Town Centers") are being developed to replicate many of the community or neighborhood shopping experiences offered by downtowns. These new centers try to recreate downtown's sense of place with small building footprints, multi-story buildings and an open-air environment. They are built to be pedestrian friendly, convenient and safe. Traditional downtown areas that are walkable already possess what many developers are trying to duplicate. The economic potential of increased sales from the lifestyle segment can be realized in walkable downtowns business expansion and recruitment to create an appropriate mix of retail, entertainment and service businesses (see market analysis toolbox at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/dma/>).

Making Your Community More Walkable

According to Dan Burden of Walkable Communities, Inc, characteristics of a walkable town include:

- Intact town center with a quiet, pleasant main street containing a hearty, healthy set of stores;
- Residential densities including mixed income and mixed uses near the town center;
- Many public places for people to assemble, play and associate with others within their neighborhood;
- Universal design that respects and accommodates people of all abilities;
- Traffic on main street and in neighborhoods that move at safe, pleasant and courteous speeds;

- Streets and trails that are well linked, often in a grid or other highly connected pattern;
- Design that is properly scaled allowing most residents to get to most services in ¼ mile (walking distance);
- Town is designed for people first, cars second;
- Town thinks small with caps on parking and store size;
- The town has a vision and decision makers are visionary, communicative, and forward thinking.

How a Downtown has Improved Walkability

Downtown Lodi, California (city population of 60,000) launched a \$4.5 million public-private pedestrian oriented project, including a retrofit of five main street blocks from building face to building face. On the main School Street, sidewalks were widened, curbs bulbed out at intersections and colored paving stones laid in the new sidewalks and street. A striking gateway was installed, as well as 140 street trees, lighting, benches, and other streetscape amenities. The city credits the pedestrian improvements, as well as economic development incentives, with the 60 new businesses, the drop in the vacancy rate from 18% to 6% and 30% increase in downtown sales tax revenues.

According to Kent Robertson of St. Cloud State University, downtowns have tremendous potential to take advantage of their compactness and become a desirable place for pedestrians. The right conditions include:

- Well-maintained and easily negotiable sidewalks;
- Routes that are convenient in terms of location and traffic delays;
- Distances are deemed reasonably walkable;
- People feel confident in terms of personal security and traffic safety; and
- The walking experience is enjoyable and interesting.

The October 2000 and August 2001 issues of Let's Talk Business provides related discussions by Kent Robertson on creating a sense of place and balancing parking and pedestrians. See: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/publicat/letstalk.html>

Economic development planning in communities of all size should recognize the importance of walkability. Local investment in pedestrian-oriented infrastructure and land uses can improve walkability and economic viability.

Sources:

Indicators Of Livable Communities prepared by the Maine Development Foundation. <http://www.mdf.org/>
The Economic Benefits of Walkable Communities, Focus on Livable Communities prepared by the Local Government Commission. <http://www.lgc.org/about/index.html>
How Can I Find and Help Build a Walkable Community prepared by Walkable Communities, Inc. <http://www.walkable.org/article1.htm>

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