

WALKABLE NEIGHBORHOODS AND WALKABILITY IN SAN ANTONIO

STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE

At one time, communities were designed to accommodate pedestrians and walking was the preferred mode of transportation for most Americans. With the advent of the automobile, federal investment in the highway system, the decentralization of metropolitan areas and the movement of families to the suburbs, the built environment is increasingly designed to accommodate cars. Development trends have contributed to car-dependent, low-density suburban areas that require residents to travel farther to meet basic needs. Land-use policy in much of the 20th century, likewise, greatly reduced walkability.

More recently, concerns about urban sprawl and the environment, however, have contributed to a renewed interest in walking and in walkable neighborhoods. The infrastructure in pedestrian-friendly areas is designed to promote walking and biking. Often located near city centers, walkable neighborhoods are characterized by high density, mixed income and mixed-use space with affordable housing and access to public transit, restaurants, schools, businesses and parks. They are vibrant areas with visually-appealing landscape and architecture that enhance the walking experience. Complete streets, adequate lighting and sufficient numbers of other pedestrians allow walkers to move easily and feel safe in walkable areas.

More than just a pleasant experience, walkable neighborhoods contribute to a sense of community. Areas with active pedestrian activity create opportunities for “casual contact” with neighbors on sidewalks, at nearby parks or area schools that build social capital and foster public trust. Because walking is built into daily activities, residents who live in walkable neighborhoods, on average weigh 6 to 10 pounds less than those who live in other areas. Pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods are good for the environment. Walking decreases energy usage and reduces traffic congestion. Residents save on transportation-related expenses – purchasing and maintaining vehicles -- often the second largest expense in many U.S. households.

Finally, walkable neighborhoods are increasingly desirable places to live and work for baby boomers and millennials alike. According to housing experts:

- Baby boomers seek smaller homes in walkable communities with easy access to health care or at the very least, are interested in smaller homes located in suburban town centers.
- Millennials and skilled young workers are attracted to vibrant, urban walkable spaces that offer opportunities for social interaction and easy access to restaurants, shopping and work.
- Businesses are increasingly interested in locating in walkable communities where they can attract and retain young professionals.
- Homes in walkable neighborhoods command a premium over homes located in similar but less-walkable neighborhoods. Real estate values in the next 25 years are expected to rise fastest in pedestrian-friendly, mixed use areas.
- Increased property values associated with walkable neighborhoods may result in higher property tax revenues for local governments.

WALKABILITY IN SAN ANTONIO

San Antonio is largely a car-dependent community according to Walk Score, an internet-based tool that assigns a numerical value to over 10,000 neighborhoods in almost 3,000 cities in the U.S., Canada and Australia. Using

GPS mapping, Walk Score gauges the proximity between residential properties and typical consumer destinations. Points are awarded when amenities such as grocery stores, coffee shops, sidewalk cafes, theaters, parks, libraries, retail outlets, restaurants and schools are located within a ¼ mile of residential properties.

Walk scores range from “100” – the most walkable communities – to “0” – car-dependent communities. (Walking the Walk pg 6). With a walk score of 85, New York and San Francisco are the top two walkable cities in the U.S. San Antonio, by comparison, has a community walk score of 41, although some historic areas of San Antonio -- Downtown, Five Points and Tobin Hill – have higher walk scores and are walk-friendly.

Increasing San Antonio’s walkability could help build community, attract businesses and increase property values. It could also contribute to a more health citizenry. In 2003, the Center for Disease Control identified San Antonio as having the nation’s highest obesity rate. Since then, the city has engaged in a number of efforts to combat obesity and increase physical activity in San Antonio including adding greenways to locations across the city to promote walking and biking.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO MAKE COMMUNITIES WALKABLE?

- Encourage community members to assess neighborhood walkability and to talk with public officials about improvements
- Add trees, streetlights, sidewalks or seating to neighborhoods – even modest improvements can help
- Hold events to enliven areas and attract walkers to neighborhoods
- Design complete streets and walk and bike friendly neighborhoods -- two-way streets with narrow lanes and curbside parking slow traffic and create a buffer for walkers
- Retrofit older car-dependent suburbs to make them compact mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly areas
- Preserve open space and create walking trails
- Increase public awareness of the value of walking and create walking groups

AGENCIES/PROGRAMS WORKING TO PROMOTE WALKING AND WALKABILITY IN SAN ANTONIO

City of San Antonio – maintains a ring of scenic trails along Salado Creek, Leon Creek, Medina River and the San Antonio River that promote hiking and biking.

The Mayor’s Fitness Council - coordinates initiatives that encourage physical activity such as Fitness in the Park, a bike share program and San Antonio Walks!, a program to establish walking groups in the community.

San Antonio-Bexar County Metropolitan Planning Organization - Walkable Community Program educates the public about the benefits of walking; helps residents to identify infrastructure improvements that promote walking and biking.

San Antonio Metropolitan Health District - created a Neighborhood Walking Resource Guide with a checklist that enables pedestrians to identify barriers to and strengthen neighborhood walkability.

San Antonio Sports Foundation – offers sports and fitness programs for the community including a 12-week summer program that encourages families to be physically active and eat healthy

South Texas Walking Club - promotes walking in the community, partners with local agencies to create walking groups and trains walk group leaders

YMCA of Greater San Antonio - holds *Siclovía*, a family-friendly event that promotes walking and bicycling. A large section of a major city street is closed to allow residents to walk, bike, run and exercise during the event.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

America Walks - <http://americawalks.org/>

Every Body Walk: <http://everybodywalk.org>

National Center for Bicycling and Walking Campaign to Make America Walkable - www.bikefed.org

Partnership for a Walkable America - <http://www.walkableamerica.org/>

Smart Growth America: Making Neighborhoods Great Together - <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/>

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