

Let's Plan on Walking

by Hannah Twaddell

In Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, British everyman Arthur Dent first sees alien visitor Ford Prefect standing, inexplicably, in the middle of a busy street with his hand outstretched toward an onrushing VW Beetle. After Arthur pushes the fellow out of harm's way, he learns Ford was trying to befriend the car. The newcomer had decided these ubiquitous metal creatures must be our planet's dominant life form.

Well, in a sense he was right. Our cars are very much a part of us now. But while we now enjoy a level of mobility unprecedented in human history, our growing dependence upon our cars has created some challenging problems. Seniors become trapped in their homes as their ability to drive diminishes. Children can't get anywhere by themselves, and their parents are stressed to the limit with the complicated job of chauffeuring them everywhere. Traffic congestion spoils once-peaceful rural roadways, renders major arterials hopelessly inefficient, and spews noxious gas into our air.

We can't afford the money or land area to keep expanding our roadways. And, given all the negative consequences of more traffic, many communities are recognizing that we must create alternatives to driving in order to sustain – or restore – our quality of life. But efforts to invigorate alternatives like public transit often fail because so many of the places we try to serve are so far apart, and difficult to navigate without a car.

One key part of any approach to reducing people's need to drive lies in pulling our far-flung destinations closer together and designing safe ways to access them on foot. In other words, we need to create walkable communities.

WHAT IS A WALKABLE COMMUNITY?

When asked to picture a walkable community, many folks remember a neighborhood, town square, or city block where people of all ages enjoyed being outside. It featured streets along which people could comfortably walk and talk, buildings they could easily see and enter on foot, and a variety of folks out and about.



Well designed pedestrian amenities make for a more comfortable environment for walkers. Above left, Honolulu; above right, Ft. Lauderdale.



DAN BERDEN

Before the advent of the automobile, when towns were built along rail lines and rivers, it would have been unthinkable to lay out a place that couldn't be navigated on foot. Since the mid-20th century, however, it's been unthinkable to develop a place where you can't drive. In order to make room for bigger roads and parking lots, we often sacrifice the elements that make a community walkable. We have to think about design in a whole new way if we want to accommodate pedestrians as well as drivers.

The following list from the 1994 "Walk Boston" plan is a good summary of the basic elements planners need to consider to shape walkable places:¹

- **Coherence.** A clear, understandable and organized sidewalk, street, and land-use system consistent with the scale and function of the surrounding urban context;

- **Continuity.** A pattern of design and usage that unifies the pedestrian system;

- **Equilibrium.** A balance among transportation modes that encourages pedestrians;

- **Safety.** Pedestrian protection from automobiles and bicycles. Adequate time to cross intersections. Physical separation from fast-moving cars;

- **Comfort.** Secure and negotiable paving materials for sidewalks and cross-

walks. Unobstructed passage on the sidewalk and at corners;

- **Accessibility.** The opportunity for all individuals to use the pedestrian environment fully;

- **Sociability.** A sense of hospitality and suitability for

individual and community interactions;

- **Efficiency.** Simplicity, cost-effectiveness, and minimum pedestrian delay in design and function; and

- **Attractiveness.** Clean, efficient, and well-maintained surroundings, with adjacent storefronts and activities that provide sidewalk interest.

Effective pedestrian plans are built (literally and figuratively) from the ground up by engaging community residents in simple, straightforward activities that help them envision these

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¹ *A Pedestrian Perspective on the Central Artery Project in Downtown Boston: A Report by the Pedestrian Issues Task Force* (Boston, MA 1994).

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fundamental elements. Walkability advocate Dan Burden (named by *Time Magazine* in 2001 as one of the nation's top civic innovators) has prepared a list of Walkable Community Criteria that can be used to stimulate public awareness and discussions of walkability in any community. See *How Does Your Community Stack Up?* on next page.

BENEFITS OF WALKABLE COMMUNITIES

What can communities achieve by improving their walkability? An increasing number of cities and towns are realizing that walkability can play a key role in achieving broader economic and social goals, such as revitalizing urban centers, creating a sense of place in suburbs, and reclaiming the attractiveness of small towns.

1. Revitalizing Urban Centers

One of the keys to regional and local prosperity is the ability to attract and retain highly skilled people. And it isn't enough just to have a strong employment base. Many people can, and do, choose where they want to live based on factors beyond their ability to make a living. "Quality of life" has become the coin of the realm.

The economic value of a community's attractiveness as a place to live, work, and play is becoming widely recognized by business leaders, local officials, and planners. This has led many cities to focus on providing ample outdoor recreational opportunities and a built environment that encourages a vibrant street life – elements that require a welcoming, walkable environment for people of all ages.

The award-winning transportation plan for Greater Binghamton, New York, *Transportation Tomorrow: Placemaking for Prosperity*, embraces this premise by targeting pedestrian, bicycle, and transit investment within the region's existing downtown and neighborhood centers.

Binghamton's planning process helped local leaders and residents recognize that many of the characteristics



The best way to slow down drivers is to get more people walking.

needed to promote walkability were already in place: integrated street networks; established urban centers; and neighborhoods and commercial areas well-scaled for pedestrian, car, and bus access. The transportation plan recognizes that pedestrian and transit investments will facilitate the region's ability to build on these assets and attract new economic generators.

Older cities like Binghamton, whose economies have faltered or shifted, are increasingly recognizing the value of pedestrian-oriented transportation investments as catalysts for urban revitalization. These types of improvements, combined with relatively low costs of living, historic quality, and rich cultural history, have helped cities like Birmingham, AL, Greensboro, NC, and Pittsburgh, PA attract new people and jobs.

2. Creating a Sense of Place in Suburbs

According to the Urban Land Institute, many suburban residents have grown tired of traffic congestion and are developing a heightened appreciation for a sense of place. These households are looking for "integrated live-work-shop places that are exciting, aesthetically pleasing, and pedestrian-friendly, and that offer a wide choice of transportation choices."²

Unfortunately, such environments are still rare. Most suburban centers "encom-

pass a variety of freestanding uses with little or no integration among uses, a transportation system that is automobile-oriented and often hostile to pedestrians, and an absence of civic identity or sense of place."³

Making suburbs more pedestrian-friendly requires several fundamental changes, from the layout and scale of the



Large suburban retailers also benefit from an attractive, pedestrian-oriented setting.

streets to the orientation, proportion, and mix of uses among the buildings. It's not enough just to build some sidewalks or wedge in a few housing units behind the shopping mall. The basic layout of the place must feature well-connected streets that serve as a framework for "human-scale," pedestrian-accessible

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² *Transforming Suburban Business Districts* (Urban Land Institute 2001).

³ *Ibid.*

How Does Your Community Stack Up?

Try informally rating your community on a 1-10 scale for the following Walkable Community Criteria developed by Dan Burden of Walkable Communities <www.walkable.org>. As Burden suggests, trust your intuition and common sense to decide on your answers. Compare your answers with those of others. If your town consistently achieves high scores for at least half the criteria, you're doing well.

On a Scale of 1-10, How Much Does Your Community Feature:

1. *Intact Town Centers.* This center includes a quiet, pleasant main street with a hearty, healthy set of stores. These stores are open for business a minimum of 8 hours a day. The stores include things like barbers/beauticians, hardware, druggist, small grocery/deli, sets of good restaurants, clothing, variety store, ice cream shop, stores that attract children, many youth and senior services, places to conduct civic and personal business, library, all within a 1/4 mile walk (5 minutes) of the absolute center.

2. *Residential Densities, Mixed Incomes, Mixed Uses.* Near the town center, and in a large town at appropriate transit locations, there are true neighborhoods. Higher densities are toward the town center and in appropriate concentrations further out. Housing includes mixed income and mixed use. Granny flats, design studios and other affordable housing are part of the mix in even the wealthiest neighborhoods.

3. *Public Space.* There are many places for people to assemble, play and associate with others within their neighborhood. The best neighborhoods have welcoming public space

within 1/8th mile (700 feet) of all homes, easily accessible to everyone.

4. *Universal Design.* The community has a healthy respect for people of all abilities, and has appropriate ramps, medians, refuges, crossings of driveways, sidewalks on all streets where needed, benches, shade and other basic amenities to make walking feasible and enjoyable for everyone.

5. *Speed-controlled Streets.* Traffic moves on main streets and in neighborhoods at safe, pleasant, courteous speeds. Most streets are designed to keep speeds low. Many of these streets are tree lined, have on-street parking, and use other methods to keep traffic speeds under control. There is an absence of one-way couplets designed to flush downtown of its traffic in a rush or flight to the suburbs.

6. *Well-linked Streets.* The town has good block form, often in a grid or other highly connected pattern. Some of the newer neighborhoods that were built to cul-de-sac or other fractured patterns are now being repaired for walking by putting in trail connectors in many places.

7. *Community Scales in Walkable Radii.* From most homes it is possible to get to most services in 1/4 mile (actual walked distance). Neighborhood elementary schools are within a 1/4 mile walking radius of most homes, while high schools are accessible to most children (1 mile radius). Most important features (parks) are within 1/8 mile, and a good, well designed place to wait for a high frequency (10-20 minutes) bus is within 1/4 to 1/2 mile.

8. *Towns Designed for People.* Look for clues that decisions are being made for people first, cars second. You shouldn't see vast parking lots downtown, multiple commer-

cial driveways along major streets, limited on-street parking, and fast turning radii on corners. Towns designed for people have many investments being made in plazas, parks, and walkways.

9. *Thinking Small.* Walkable towns require car-minimizing strategies like maximum parking allowed, versus minimum required. Groceries and other important stores are not permitted to build above a reasonable square footage, and must face the street. Neighborhood schools are community centers. Older buildings are rebuilt in place, or converted to modern needs.

10. *Many People Walking.* This sounds like a silly statement at first ... but think again. Often there are places that look walkable, but no one walks. Why? Is it crime? Is there no place to walk to? Are the downtown stores not open convenient hours? You should be able to see a great diversity of those walking and bicycling. Some will be very young, some very old, some with disabilities.

11. *Visionary Plans.* Visionary master plans provide direction, build ownership of citizens, engage diverse people, and create opportunities for implementation, to get past sticky issues, and deal with the most basic, fundamental, necessary decisions and commitment. There are budgets set aside for neighborhoods, for sidewalks, trails, links, parks. ...

12. *Visionary Leaders.* Decision-makers are visionary, communicative, and forward-thinking. The town has a strong majority of leaders who "get it." ... The regional government understands and supports the building of a town center, and is not attempting to take funds from the people at the center to induce or support sprawl.



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Attractively designed, pedestrian-oriented commercial arteries are one component of a community's "quality of life," an important factor in economic health. What image of the community do each of these commercial roadways convey?

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buildings and civic spaces. It's not necessary, nor always desirable, to increase density, but the design and diversity of most suburban built environments need to be retooled in order to achieve these goals.

This is a tough nut to crack, since we're talking about established places that often serve as major sources of revenue for their communities. They work, in a sense, the way they are – and it can be expensive and difficult to reshape them. But, says the Institute, there is a growing market that is yielding a significant “place-making dividend” for those communities that develop mixed use, walkable, town centers.

For community residents and businesses, the center becomes a special place that they adopt as their own, such that it reaps the benefits of repeat visitation. For developers, the place-making dividend means increased tenant demand, higher rents, and enduring real estate values. *Editor's Note: for a closer look at town center development, see Philip Langdon's "Creating the Missing Hub" and Kennedy Smith's "What Makes a Town Center a Town Center," in PCJ #62 (available at: <plannersweb.com/wfiles/w190.html> and </w307.html>).*

3. Reclaiming Small Cities & Towns

Walkability isn't just for cities and suburbs. The economic health and livability of small towns and villages depends upon it, too.

Participants in surveys and focus groups conducted for a recent national study on integrating land use and transportation in rural communities repeatedly emphasized the need to invest in sidewalks, crossings, and street amenities in order to take advantage of the compact, connected design they already enjoy.⁴ This is particularly important for the growing number of rural communi-

⁴ Author's note: I was privileged to serve as principal investigator for this recently completed study, sponsored by the National Cooperative Highway Research Program. See NCHRP Project 08-52, Best Practices in Enhancing the Land Use Transportation Connection in Rural America.



Outdoor cafes help create a setting that makes walking an even more enjoyable experience, as here in Victoria, B.C.

ties whose economic base is shifting from manufacturing or farming into the business of attracting tourists and income-generating YAPS (Young Active Professionals) and WOOFs (Well-Off Old Folks).

For example, Spring Lake Village, Michigan (population 2,514), was one of nine communities recognized by the Michigan Municipal League in 2006 with an “extreme makeover” award for its progress in addressing tough economic development issues. Over the past ten years the village has dealt with a deteriorating industrial and commercial base and aging infrastructure by using a range of approaches. Strategies have included forming a central business downtown district authority, establishing a tax increment finance district, and preparing a downtown master plan (with a design manual).

Investing in streetscape improvements has also been of critical importance. According to Town Manager Ryan Cotton, the village's hard work and capital investments “have paid off in the form of \$35 million in new private investments since 2002.” As Cotton adds, “these redevelopments have contributed significantly to the village's historic, high

⁵ As reported in the *Grand Haven Tribune*; www.tinyurl.com/np4xb

quality, quaint, and walkable community vision.”⁵

In fact, small cities may be at an advantage in promoting walkability over their bigger neighbors. As Kent Robertson, Professor of Community Development at Minnesota's St. Cloud State University recently wrote in the *Downtown Idea Exchange*, “Small-city downtowns tend to be of a more human scale. ... Not only can some people feel more comfortable and less overwhelmed in smaller downtowns, but the shorter distances between destinations makes the downtown intrinsically more walkable. With the proper attention paid to streetscape, design amenities, and economic activities, this feature can lend itself to the establishment of a strong sense of place.”⁶

The sense of place fostered in walkable cities and towns can also help attract tourists – something increasingly recognized by business and civic leaders. In *Let's Talk Business*, a newsletter put out by the University of Wisconsin's Center for Community Economic Development, Bill Ryan notes that “communities and their downtowns that are walkable are capturing a greater share of tourist dollars.”⁷

The bottom line is that the connection between pedestrian-oriented investments and economic vitality is growing stronger every day – in all types of communities.

IMPROVING WALKABILITY

What should planning commissions do to improve the walkability of their communities? I suggest focusing on three goals: design places for people; design streets for everyone; and design plans that work.

1. Design Places for People

Pay attention to “the four Ds” – the basic elements that make the difference

⁶ “Small-City Downtowns Can Benefit From Their Small-Town Characteristics,” in *Downtown Idea Exchange* (April 15, 2006).

⁷ “Economic Benefits of A Walkable Community,” in *Let's Talk Business* (July 2003).

⁸ The Four D's concept is based upon research by Reid Ewing of the Center for Smart Growth at the University of Maryland and Robert Cervero of the University of California, Berkeley.

between a place that works and one that doesn't.⁸

Density. Strive for a balance of built and open space that matches the level of liveliness you want to achieve. The purpose of an urban center is to bring people together, so it's important to pack in enough activities to make it vibrant. A quiet small town, on the other hand, loses its character if buildings grow too tall or start to fill up the open fields along the gateways into town.

Diversity. Create a blend of residential, commercial, and other uses that makes it easy for people to do the things they want to do in the given setting. Make it feasible for workers to walk to shops and restaurants from their office, or for kids to walk to school in their neighborhood. One big fringe benefit: as more people make these types of trips on foot, traffic congestion along key roadways will be reduced.

Design. Scale the streets and orient the buildings to make it easy for people to navigate the place on foot. Provide focal points and gathering places to which people can orient themselves, and amenities like benches and rest rooms. Landscape architect Richard Untermyer has noted that "comfort is critical to the success of pedestrian improvements ... there need to be places for people to stop and rest, to find food and drink, and to get out of the rain." As he adds, "comfort also means that the pedestrian environment needs to be visually attractive and well-maintained."⁹

Paying attention to design also means taking into account your area's climate. Design strategies that are important in hot, dry regions such as southern Arizona

(like offering shaded seating areas and awning-covered promenades) will certainly be different than those one would use in cold, snowy areas such as the upper Midwest (like ensuring well-plowed sidewalks and providing heated pedestrian walkways).

Destination. Put important destination locations in walkable locations. The public library and municipal offices, for example, belong in the center of town, not out on a highway; and people shouldn't always have to drive to reach a community park. Also, cluster regional activity centers around transit stations or highway intersections that connect to a network of roads. This will help cut down on travel distances and increase peoples' ability to walk once at their primary destination.

2. Design Streets for Everyone

There is a growing interest in policies to promote "complete streets." In a nutshell, complete streets are streets designed to enable safe access for pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and bus riders of all ages and abilities. This includes people with disabilities, such as wheelchair users. For some good examples, take a look at the "Early Success Stories" posted on the National Complete Streets Coalition's web site: <www.completestreets.org>.

The single best thing you can do to make streets safer for pedestrians is to slow down the traffic. Researchers have found that "a pedestrian hit at 40 mph has an 85 percent chance of being killed, while at 20 mph, the fatality rate is only 5 percent."¹⁰ And the best way to slow drivers is to get more people walking and biking through our neighborhoods, main

streets, town centers, and downtowns. As Dan Burden of Walkable Communities puts it, "Where people walk in great abundance virtually all motorists are courteous to pedestrians."¹¹

While traffic calming strategies can go a long way toward reducing vehicle speeds, it is also essential to pay attention to the kind of streetscape design considerations noted earlier in the article. You'll convert many more people to the pleasures of walking and biking if you provide them with a setting in which they feel safe and comfortable.

3. Design Plans That Work

As planners, we have tremendous power to make or break walkability initiatives in our communities. It's an unglamorous job, but we have to make sure our policies, regulations, and development approval processes make it as easy as possible to do the right thing.

A great resource for localities who want to make sure their plans are going to work is *Creating Walkable Communities: A Guide for Local Governments*, written by the Bicycle Federation of America.¹² It offers policy tools and strategies for essential documents such as comprehensive plans; sub-area master plans; zoning, subdivision and parking regulations; design standards; as well as other implementation techniques.

Finally, don't forget about a critical factor for generating momentum: getting the media's attention. Walkability champions need ribbon-cuttings and photo opportunities to keep the issue front and center. Celebrate the groundbreaking of a new greenway; tout the new stores flocking to the enhanced Main Street; or do a news story on children using the town's new pedestrian count-down signals. Remember: nothing breeds success like success! ♦

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Long Beach, California, provides plenty of room for bicyclists and pedestrians of all ages.

⁹ Richard Untermyer, "Getting Started," in *Planning Commissioners Journal* #25 (Winter 1997).

¹⁰ NCHRP Report 500: Vol. 10, *A Guide for Reducing Collisions Involving Pedestrians* (Transportation Research Board, 2004).

¹¹ Dan Burden, "How Do I Make My Community More Walkable," posted on <www.walkablecommunities.org>.

¹² While the 109 page long Guide was written for the Mid-America Regional Council of Governments in Kansas City, it is an excellent reference for most any community. Available online at: <www.bikewalk.org/pdfs/ncbwpubwalkablecomm.pdf>.

