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Dallas Should Walk This Way

Walkable Urbanism, Community Development, Cities

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FEBRUARY 15, 2008 — Walk Score, a new Web site popular with urbanists and environmental advocates (www.walkscore.com), rates neighborhoods by their walkability--basically the ease of meeting daily needs on foot. The higher the Walk Score, the more walkable a place is.

Beyond its utility, however, the rise of Walk Score is another indicator that how the American Dream lays out on the ground has been fundamentally changing over the past 10 to 15 years. Dallas in general and downtown Dallas in particular is well on its way to accommodating this new version of the American Dream, but more needs to be done.

The Ozzie and Harriet drivable suburban vision of the American Dream is being supplemented by the Seinfeld vision of "walkable urbanism." Led by late-marrying young adults and empty-nester baby boomers, many households are looking for the excitement and options that living and working in a walkable urban place can bring. Current demographic trends promise continued demand.

A recent [Brookings Institution survey](#) of the largest 30 metro areas in the country identifies the 157 walkable urban places that play a regionally significant role, such as concentrations of employment, education, professional sports, entertainment and housing. It ranked these metros on their per capita number of walkable urban places. Washington, D.C., was first, followed by Boston, San Francisco, Denver and Portland.

The top 15 metro areas had the vast majority, 85%, of these walkable urban places, though only two-thirds of the surveyed population. This showed that the top 30 metros are dividing between haves and have nots: metropolitan areas that have many walkable urban options and those that are lagging. Additionally, two-thirds of these 157 places had rail transit, demonstrating the importance of rail transit to the emergence of walkable urbanism.

A surprising finding of the survey is that while downtowns are a major location of walkable urbanism, downtown adjacent places are exploding in number and size. Places like Lincoln Park in Chicago, Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C., and the Pearl District in Portland, Ore., are booming alongside their resurgent downtowns.

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A major benefit of walkable urban development is that it keeps and attracts young adults to the metro area, many of whom willingly trade crushing car commutes for walkable places to live and work. Walkable urban places seem to attract the well educated, the so called "creative class." Even the nascent revival in downtown Detroit has seen 83% of new residents arriving with a college education, compared to 26% of the national population.

While the Dallas metro ranked only 25th of 30 in the Brookings' survey, there are reasons to believe your destiny is to become a major concentration of walkable urban places. That reasoning starts with your investment in Dallas Area Rapid Transit light rail and the Trinity Railway Express commuter rail. This is being followed by aggressively encouraging high-density zoning around rail stations and in downtown adjacent locations. The combination of rail transit and high density zoning is essential to allow the private real estate community to respond to the pent-up market and economic demand of walkable urban development.

Finally, it is crucial to manage the various walkable urban places that either exist or are evolving. The role model in the Dallas area is the DowntownDallas organization, which provides security, signage and strategic direction for downtown.

The future of the Dallas metro area is linked to your ability to provide both more walkability options and expanded offerings of existing walkable urban places. There should be 15-20 more places like downtown Dallas, downtown Fort Worth, Uptown, Plano Town Center and Addison Circle for the region to meet the pent-up demand for walkable urbanism.

Building those additional walkable urban places will continue the economic development miracle that has been Dallas metro for so many years and it will increase your Walk Scores as well.