

How Can I Find and Help Build a Walkable Community?

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This is one of the most important and necessary questions anyone should ask before settling down in a permanent location. Many corporate leaders looking to expand or move locations are now looking for towns offering appropriate start up breaks, but also where they and their middle managers want to live many years, raise a family and retire. Our web site, has a 12-step program for defining and achieving or strengthening community walkability.

But finding a walkable town is a different task. So, I have built a list of the 12 most important things to rate when searching for a Walkable Community. Note that there are many walkable communities in America that are declining, due to poor politics, staffing or a lost vision. And there are some communities on the cusp of becoming walkable that have strong leadership and direction. Given a choice, I would move to the community that is up and coming.



You can, of course, move into a new Walkable Community, such as Seaside, Celebration, Abacoa, Florida; Kentlands, Maryland, The Crossings, Mountain View, California; Fairview Village, Orenco Station, Oregon; Northwest Landing, Washington; and now hundreds of others. I know these places well. I return to them often, photographing, walking and measuring their essences. The paint, the grass, everything is fresh and new there. Some of these new urban villages are rather complete, and fit well into the fabric of the greater town or region they share.

But if you don't want to wait for these places to become organic, go for the real towns of America ... they are abundant, old, tried and proven, and they need many defenders of their greatness. This article is mostly on how to find existing Walkable Communities. They are way too numerous to list more than a fraction.

This article is also a little bit on how to protect these delicate real places of the heart. As I write this, I am sitting in East Lansing, one of my favorite Walkable Communities. I am eager to go out for a walk. But I am also 100 miles from Holland, Michigan. I am torn - I'd like to go there, right now, take in the color of the tulips, walk its streets and listen to the outward pride and laughter of its people.

You can either be a passenger on the train to change, or get up in the engine helping stoke the fire, taking in the gusty winds of change feeling the sting and smell of hot cinders burning the hair off the nape of your neck. These up and coming communities may be more affordable, and are likely to be fun places to place your energies. But before you move, truly check out the politics of change.

Good towns come in all regions of the country. The best are often small places like Keene, New Hampshire; Winter Park, Florida; Flagstaff, Arizona; Crested Butte, Colorado or Los Gatos, California ... or they include big cities like Seattle, Washington; Chicago, Illinois; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Minneapolis and

St Paul, Minnesota; Portland, Oregon; or San Diego, California that have many small, well designed compact, intact neighborhoods, each with a village center and a character and personality of its own.

In some of these villages, strong enclaves of Hispanic, Jewish, Polish, German, Asian, Afro-American or gay cultures are found, taking pride building or maintaining their communities. Other villages are fully mixed, rich in diversity of people, age, abilities and wealth. You can live in a town that is sprawling itself



to death, and still lead a healthy life in several great neighborhoods. Note that top rated towns in this listing either already have or are now developing many villages in their city.

Finding the Great Walkable Community. My wife, Lys, and I left Central Ohio the day after we got married in June, 1970 and moved west in search of a great place to live. We struck gold, almost by accident, in our first search for a town. We settled

into and lived in Missoula, Montana without a car for nearly ten years, very happy, healthy, and highly engaged with every level of community life. We knew, felt ownership and took pride in the many good places. We walked and watched over green, canopied streets almost everywhere. We felt the courtesies of drivers who watched out for us. We knew each park, each of the five valley neighborhoods and other places in the pre-sprawl portions of town.

It seems we came to know everyone, and everyone knew us. We had many dozens of friends and hundreds, if not thousands of associates. During our evenings we bicycled into and up the Rattlesnake Creek, Grant Creek, Pattee Canyon, the Hells Gate or, when we had the time, out to French Town or Lolo. Our first child, Jodi, who maintains this web site, was born there. Our small company, Bikecentennial (now Adventure Cycling), was started there 25 years ago, and is still a small but healthy addition to the local economy.

Missoula has a healthy downtown. In the summer a weekly farmers market is held on Saturdays. Many hundreds of people walk or bicycle in to buy their fruit filled pastries, breads, fresh fruits, and organic vegetables. Others come for coffee, listen to music, watch people dance, or just visit. Missoula also has a Friday noon gathering on the rebuilt Clark's Fork River front. People come almost like a weekly pilgrimage for more food, more music and more fun. And just across the street from our little red ginger bread house at 317 Beverly, in Bonner Park, people came on Wednesday nights to hear the small but good community band. Some who bring their cars to these events park them blocks away, some too embarrassed to be seen arriving by car, but not knowing the beauty of walking there.



One immigrant, poor in money, rich in pride of being an American, conceived and built with his own hands, along with the 50-60 volunteers he and former Mayor Daniel Kemmis brought together, the newest and best post WWII carousel in the nation. Missoula also boasts a variety of pricing and sizing of housing stock, great waterfront and trails and a pleasant college campus.

Like many Walkable Communities, today Missoula is also a hearty sprawl place. One only has to look to the down slopes of the mountains to see the ugly brutality of unregulated, un-walkable growth patterns. But Missoula, like all vision directed towns, has and continues to build upon its walkability, while other parts of the same town and county hold contempt for walkability, watering down, isolating and making more distant healthy lifestyles in order to cash into the hungry car culture, complete with all of its demands and droppings.

Like many good places, Missoula is a town highly conflicted, ever in balance. Goodness is not always understood by all people living in a place. There are many short-term investors milking and robbing from long-term accomplishments. It is all too easy for decision makers to close down good, well located and sized schools, healthy and vital local parks, and well located small churches, grocery stores or other retail in order to build big. It always appears to be cheaper to provide the same function on the bigger



and cheaper parcel farther out. These farther out places are locations where cars appear to be happy. These outward parcels are cheaper yes, but as we destroy the essences of a good neighborhood, forcing ourselves into a car to have what we need we whittle away the many reasons we came to invest here in the first place. If you move to a walkable community, you must understand its value then learn the skills of building and defending its goodness.

Places more abandoned of walkability, health and vitality have few conflicts. Their sense of place, pride, community values have been lost, or chased away.

All towns in our nation have some degree of walkability. Some hold less than 5%, where microscopes are needed to find the remaining shredded and often buried fragments. Some, such as Littleton, New Hampshire, where they are too poor to afford sprawl, have nearly 98% walkable scale and features. When you find a town with good walkable features, such as Keene, New Hampshire, you keep returning to recharge. I know I do. I go back often, settle into a nice center town hotel, hang out at local eateries, listen to the town chatter, walk the main street day and night, over and over 2-4 days at a time.

Walkability items to be rated are always on a scale. A 1-10 scale can be personalized and applied to each of the below twelve categories. Common sense and powers of observation are used to make these determinations. The categories are in no particular order. Never pick a town that you have not visited. Always ask for second and third opinions.

If I were making a commitment to move to a town I would want the town to have high scores on 6 or more of the following 12 categories:

Walkable Communities Have:

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. If this is a county seat, the county buildings are downtown. If this is an incorporated town the town hall is in the town center. The library is open for business at least 10 hours a day 6-7 days a week. There is still a post office downtown.



2. Residential densities, mixed income, mixed use. Near the town center, and in a large town at appropriate transit locations there will be true neighborhoods. Higher densities are toward the town center and in appropriate concentrations further out. Housing includes mixed income and mixed use. A truly walkable community does not force lots of people to drive to where they work. Aspen, for example, is a great place to shop and play...but fails to provide housing for anyone who works there. 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. These spaces are easily accessed by all people.

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. Key Streets Are Speed Controlled. Traffic moves on main street 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 that are affordable means 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. In most parts of the nation the streets are also green, or have other pleasant landscaping schemes in dry climates.

6. Streets, Trails are Well Linked. The town has good block form, often in a grid or other highly connected pattern. Although hilly terrain calls for slightly different patterns, the linkages are still frequent. 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. These links are well designed so that there are many eyes on these places. Code for new streets no longer permits long streets that are disconnected.

7. Design is Properly Scaled to 1/8th, 1/4 and 1/2 mile radius segments. From most homes it is possible to get to most services in ¼ mile (actual walked distance). Neighborhood elementary schools are within a ¼ mile walking radius of most homes, while high schools are accessible to most children (1 mile radius). Most important features (parks) are within 1/8th mile, and a good, well designed place to wait for a high frequency (10-20 minutes) bus is within ¼ to ½ mile. Note that most of these details can be seen on a good local planning map, and even many can be downloaded from the web.

8. Town is Designed for People. Look for clues that decisions are being made for people first, cars second. Does the town have a lot of open parking lots downtown? Are a lot of streets plagued with multiple commercial driveways, limited on-street parking, fast turning radii on corners. Towns designed for people have many investments being made in plazas, parks, walkways ... rarely are they investing in decongesting intersections on the far reaches of town. Towns designed for people are tearing down old, non-historic dwellings, shopping plazas and such and converting them to compact, mixed use, mixed income properties. Ask to review the past year of building permits by category. Much is told about what percentage of construction that is infill and independent small builder stock versus big builder single price range housing or retail stock.

9. Town is Thinking Small. The most walkable towns are boldly stepping forward requiring maximum parking allowed, versus minimum required. Groceries and other important stores are not permitted to build above a reasonable square footage, must place the foot print of the structure to the street, etc. Palo Alto, for instance, caps their groceries at 20,000 square feet. This assures that groceries, drug stores and other important items are competitive at a size that is neighborhood friendly. Neighborhood schools are community centers. Older buildings are rebuilt in



place, or converted to modern needs. Most parking is on-street.

10. In Walkable Communities There Are 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? There is always a reason. Is it crime? Is it that there is no place to walk to, even though the streets and walkways are pleasant? 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. People with disabilities will be common. Another clue, where people walk in great abundance virtually all motorists are courteous to pedestrians. It is true.

11. The Town and Neighborhoods have a Vision. Seattle, Washington, Portland, Oregon and Austin, Texas are just three examples where neighborhood master plans have been developed. Honolulu sets aside about \$1M per year of funds to be spent by each neighborhood. 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. The community no longer talks about where they will get the money, but how they will change their priorities.

12. Decision Makers Are Visionary, Communicative, and Forward Thinking. The town has a strong majority of leaders who "get it". Leaders know that they are not to do all the work ... but to listen and respond to the most engaged, involved, broad minded citizens. They rarely are swayed by the anti-group, they seek the opinions and involvement big brush citizens and retailers. They are purposefully changing and building



policies, practices, codes and decisions to make their towns pleasant places for people ... reinvesting in the town center, disinfecting in sprawl. These people know the difference between a green field, brown field and grey field. They know what Active Living by Design is all about. 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. Often there is a charismatic leader on the town board, chamber of commerce, planning board, there is an architectural review team, a historic preservation effort, and overall good public process. Check out the web site of the town ... if they focus on their golf courses, tax breaks, great medical services, scenic majestic mountains, or proximity to the sea ... fail to emphasize their neighborhood schools, world class library, lively downtown, focus on citizen participation ... they are lost, bewitched and bewildered in their own lust and lure of Walt Disney's Pleasure Island.

Finding walkable communities is a great quest we should all make together. I have many personal favorites. They come in all sizes. Each must be tested out using the above criteria before investing in these places. All are in various stages of healing or becoming more diseased, often at the same time.

Generally, I like a town to be on the small side, but larger towns are on my list if they have many good neighborhoods and villages. Some highly favored towns (Crested Butte, Colorado) have as few as 1400 people, many, such as Littleton, New Hampshire, pop 7,000) 5-15,000. A good size town that is complete can provide good services when populated by 30-50,000 people. When towns get up to 100,000 or more, many added services, like efficient transit, are a must to remain walkable and fun.

My Own Search. Having worked in over 1200 communities in North America I am often asked “What is your favorite Walkable Community?” Easy. In North America it is Victoria, British Columbia. It is the one good great place. Since we cannot all live there ... It is better that I list many places, and show a range of quality and completeness. At the risk of leaving out towns that I have not visited, taken a liking to, yet have forgot to include in the short moment I had to prepare this piece, I provide a partial list below of good places to live that are Walkable Communities. Many of these places are not affordable, many are. Many people find it essential to downsize their homes, sell one or all cars in order to rebuild their quality of life and health.

In some states, such as Michigan or California, there are so many towns it is difficult to decide which to include, which to leave out. In a few states (New Mexico or Arizona) it is so hard to find a single listing that I find a need to make a more comprehensive search there at a later point in time. Example Walkable Communities (or portions thereof) I have discovered and returned to more than once include:



WALKABLE COMMUNITIES BY REGION

CANADA & NORTHEASTERN STATES

CANADA - Victoria, Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Quebec City, Halifax

NEW HAMPSHIRE - Keene, Littleton, Portsmouth, Meredith and Exeter

MAINE - Portland, Kennebunkport

VERMONT - Burlington, Brattleboro, Montpelier

MASSACHUSETTS - Boston, Cambridge, Salem

NEW YORK - New York City, Albany, Saratoga Springs, East Aurora, Huntington, Ithaca, Hamburg, Port Jefferson

NEW JERSEY - Princeton

PENNSYLVANIA - Philadelphia, Pittsburgh,
State College

MARYLAND - Annapolis, Kentlands,
Bethesda

VIRGINIA - Alexandria, Charlottesville,
Virginia

WASHINGTON, DC

SOUTHERN STATES

NORTH CAROLINA - Asheville, Chapel Hill,
Charlotte, Hendersonville

SOUTH CAROLINA - Charleston

GEORGIA - Savannah

FLORIDA - St Augustine, Winter Park, South Beach, West Palm Beach, South Beach, South Miami,
Coconut Grove, Coral Gables, Naples, Celebration, Seaside, Pensacola, Key West

TENNESSEE - Franklin

ALABAMA - Fairhope

LOUISIANA - New Orleans

MIDWESTERN STATES

OHIO - Westerville

MICHIGAN - Brighton, Holland, Milford, Birmingham, Traverse City, Kalamazoo, East Lansing, Mackinac
Island, Marquette

ILLINOIS - Chicago, Naperville

MINNESOTA - Minneapolis, St Paul

WISCONSIN - Milwaukee, Madison, Cedarburg

SOUTHWESTERN STATES

TEXAS - Austin, San Antonio

NEW MEXICO - Santa Fe

ARIZONA - Flagstaff



ROCKY MOUNTAIN STATES

COLORADO - Golden, Ft Collins, Crested Butte, Boulder

WYOMING - Jackson

MONTANA - Missoula, Big Fork, Livingston, Bozeman

PACIFIC COAST STATES

WASHINGTON - Seattle, Kirkland, Redmond, Bellevue, Olympia, Bellingham, Gig Harbor, Bainbridge Island, Port Townsend, Everett, University Place, Langley, Issaquah, Ellensburg

OREGON - Portland, Ashland, Corvallis, Eugene

CALIFORNIA - San Diego, Coronado, La Jolla, Santa Monica, Beverly Hills, Pasadena, Brea, Whittier, Claremont, Valencia, Carpinteria, Santa Barbara, Arcata, Chico, Mountain View, Santa Cruz, Monterey, Carmel-by-the-Sea, San Luis Obispo, Los Gatos, San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, Sacramento, Davis, Sonoma, Cotati, Petaluma, Healdsburg

HAWAII - Honolulu

ALASKA - Juneau

Finally, asked to name the two towns in America most deserving of praise for Herculean tasks they are now performing to overcome the ills of sprawl...Sacramento, California and Charlotte, North Carolina deserve special recognition and observation.