Livable Places **Update**

Emerging Trends in Community Planning and Design

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Why Walking and Biking Make Economic Sense: New evidence continues to emerge that cities and towns designed so that people can conveniently walk and/or bike to their destinations enjoy significant economic advantages.

Richard Florida (*Atlantic* Senior Editor and author of *The Creative Class*), found that the most walkable metropolitan areas have more highly educated people, higher property values, greater levels of innovation and more tech companies. He calculated this by putting together his collection of key economic and demographic U.S. city data and using Walkscore (an online tool measuring the walkability of individual homes and neighborhoods. Go to www.walkscore.com).

West Hollywood, a city of 36,000, enjoys the distinction of having the fourth highest walk score of any city in the country. There, city leaders have been advocates of Smart Growth and the Ahwahnee Principles almost since the day West Hollywood incorporated as a city. The community is very compact and mixed-use, offering wide and attractive sidewalks that make walking a pleasure. While the city has taken hits to their employment levels similar to the rest of the country, the average salary is almost double the U.S. average and the sales and property taxes reflect this advantage. Property values have declined very little during the recession, staying below the national average and far below the California average.

Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood features wide, walkable sidewalks and the community is compact and mixed-use, which makes walking a pleasure.

Photo Courtesy of Dan Burden

It is interesting to note that Silicon Valley companies like Google, with offices located in office parks next to highways, are footing the bill to cart some of their staff back and forth from San Francisco, a city with the second highest walkscore of the 50 largest cities in the country. Apparently many of their employees prefer to live in the city rather than the adjacent, less interesting and less walkable suburbs. Of course the City of San Francisco is not complaining! They enjoy the economic benefits of collecting property and sales taxes from these young, affluent workers.

Florida has concluded that "Walkability is a magnet that attracts and retains highly educated and skilled people and the innovative businesses that employ them" and sees the growth of walkable cities as an ecological and financial imperative.

The Health Community Chimes In: University of Wisconsin researchers have calculated the dollar savings related to health when people bike instead of drive. Combining data on air pollution, medical costs, mortality rates, car accidents, and physical fitness, the researchers found that if inhabitants of the region they studied switched to bikes for half of their short trips, the increase in air quality would create a net societal health benefit of $3.5 billion per year. An additional $3.8 billion in savings would be realized from the reduced health care costs that come with with better fitness and fewer mortalities from car accidents.

These impressive numbers are not national figures or statewide figures; they reflect only the savings in the 11 metropolitan areas that were examined. The study, published recently in the journal, *Environmental Health Perspectives*, looked at trips shorter than five miles in areas around the upper Midwest. "We were conservative," said Jonathan Patz, a professor of population health studies and a co-author of the study. The study assumed that Midwesterners would bike only when the weather was the best — had they studied other regions of the country where the weather is more conducive to biking, the savings likely would have been far more dramatic.

Less Money Spent on Gasoline Leaves More Money in Local Economies: According to CEOs for Cities, a nonprofit made up of city leaders, the average person living in the 50 largest cities drives about 24.9 miles per day. If driving were reduced by just one mile per day, these residents would spend $10 billion less per year on fuel. Add the expense of purchasing and maintenance of vehicles, and the total savings would be $28.6 billion per year collectively remaining in the pockets of the cities' residents.

This scenario is actually playing out on the ground in the City of Portland, OR. By helping its citizens to drive just 4 miles fewer a day, Portland estimates that they have an extra $2.6 billion a year remaining in the local economy.

CEOs for Cities reports that reduced driving is a result of city and regional policies that make it easy to leave the car at home — including enacting a growth boundary, increasing densities, mixing land uses, and making investments in public transportation, walking and biking. As a result of enacting these measures, Portlanders are saving time and money on transportation that is being funneled back into the local economy to support local businesses and the people they employ.

The Impact of Traffic Congestion: Scientists have been calculating the cost of sitting in traffic for several decades. The latest figures come from the Metro Area of Washington D.C. According to the *2011 Urban Mobility Report* released recently by the Texas Transportation Institute, D.C. drivers wasted 74 hours and 37 gallons of gas sitting in traffic last year.

The cost of gasoline alone was only about $100 a year. But the Institute also added the cost of time and productivity of the D.C. driver. That totaled $1,495 per driver, per year. The Institute then moved on to study Chicago where the productivity loss was $1,568. In Los Angeles, the cost was $1,334 per driver, per year. Multiply these numbers by the number of workers in each city and the cost becomes striking!

While traffic congestion is costing us money, it seems to be having another, more beneficial effect. Finding themselves caught in a frustrating tangle of urban sprawl, population growth and individual inconvenience, people — one by one — are just quietly opting out of the scene. The distance driven by Americans per capita each year flat-lined at the turn of the century and has been dropping for six years. By last spring, Americans were driving the same distance as they had in 1998.

Australian researcher Jeff Kenworthy has found that combined driving in the nation's five largest cities declined by 1.7% per capita from 1995 to 2006. Because this trend started long before 2008, it cannot be simply a result of the financial crisis.

Adie Tomer, an infrastructure researcher at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., was one of the first to spot the trend. "To me, it suggests we've started to hit this wall as far as how far and how much people are willing to drive," he says.

Canadian traffic consultant Todd Littman observes, "If you're a typical North American, at the end of a long, stressful day at work, you're not saying, 'I can't wait to get in my car'." He calls it a "rational choice" to find other alternatives.

Cities Respond: With people becoming less enamored with the car, we have both an opportunity and an imperative to rethink how we build our communities, says Brookings Institution's Tomer. He notes that cities and their residents in auto-oriented cities spend twice as much to get people around than cities that rely more heavily on public transit, walking and cycling. "Do we want to build wider roads, or do people really want the chance to do their shopping close to home? Are we looking for more localized economies?" It may be time to rethink city planning and where we spend our infrastructure money.

Many cities have been working over the past decade or two to modify their infrastructure to accommodate current needs. In spite of current city and county budget woes, this work continues today with funding from the federal government, state government, transit agencies, and a 2008 voter-approved sales tax increase in Los Angeles County.

Ventura County, for example, has been awarded more than $1 million from the federal Safe Routes to School program and a portion of the $66 million the state will be providing for this purpose. They are creating bike lanes, adding traffic signals, and making other improvements that will make it easier and more pleasant to walk or bike between homes and schools.

Ten cities in Los Angeles County are working to remove regulatory constraints to make way for transit-oriented development (TOD). With grant funds provided by LA Metro, they are updating local planning documents for existing or proposed transit stations ranging from general plan updates to TOD station area plans.

Voters Continue to Support Their Local Leaders: Today's economic situation has not made the job of governing easy for mayors and other local elected officials. Dwindling tax revenues, stagnant housing markets, increased demand for social services, unemployment, and the need to make tough decisions about public service cuts have made the job particularly difficult. These past few weeks, sit-in demonstrations have added yet another reason to lose sleep at night.

This month's election results, however, demonstrate that constituents still support their mayors. Mayor Joe Riley of Charleston, North Carolina, a national leader in the livable communities movement for decades, was re-elected for the tenth time. In California, largely appreciative voters have retained approximately 90% of the directly elected mayors running for re-election in office. The message: We may be tough on you but we still appreciate what you do!

CORRECTION: In the October 2011 LPU, we reported that the Sacramento City Infill Coordinator was Dan Parrington and this is incorrect. The Infill Coordinator's name is actually Desmond Parrington and he can be reached by email at: dparrington@cityofsacramento.org. LGC apologizes for this error.

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