

## Walking Picks Up Speed

*One year after Surgeon General champions health benefits, walking is being recognized as an economic driver and everyone's basic right*

By Jay Walljasper

As life grows ever more challenging, with concerns about health and the future nagging at us, one solution can be as simple as taking a walk.

That's the reassuring news from US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, who last year declared "physical activity is one of the best things Americans can do to improve their health and [walking is an easy way](#) to get moving" in his landmark [Call to Action to Promote Walking and Walkable Communities](#).

"Walking helps people stay both physically and mentally healthy," he stated, adding that the benefits go beyond health. "It brings business districts to life and can help reduce air pollution."

Noting that one out of two American adults suffers from a chronic disease like diabetes or heart disease and that walking reduces the risk of these conditions, Murthy initiated the [Step It Up](#) campaign to help Americans of all ages, races, income, regions and ability levels to walk more. This includes people in suburbs and small towns as well cities.

"An average of 22 minutes a day of physical activity – such as brisk walking – can significantly reduce the risk of heart disease and diabetes," he said. "The key is to get started because even a small first effort can make a big difference in improving the personal health of an individual and the public health of the nation."

Murthy explained why he focuses on walking among many other forms of physical activity:

- It is already Americans' [favorite](#) form of aerobic exercise.
- It is free.
- It does not require special skills, facilities or equipment.
- It can be done year-round, outdoors or indoors.
- People with disabilities can "walk" by rolling in wheelchairs.
- For busy people, a walk can often do double duty as transportation or social time with friends.

Surgeon General Murthy emphasized we must do more than remind Americans to walk—we need to make sure all communities are safe, convenient and comfortable for people on

foot. “Physical activity should not be the privilege of the few,” he said. “It should be [the right of everyone](#).”

“Many of us live in neighborhoods that can present barriers to walking,” he acknowledged. “Important places, such as shops, schools, parks, or senior centers, may not be near enough to reach by walking; there may be no sidewalks; or there may be concerns about safety.”

To mark the Call to Action’s first anniversary, the Surgeon General’s office partnered with FitBit on the [Step It Up Challenge](#) Oct 13-26, in which thousands of Americans worked as teams or individuals to boost the number of steps they walk each day. Over the course of two weeks, more than 60 trillion (with a T) steps were taken. Murthy proudly contributed 153,000 of his own—exceeding his 10,000 steps a day goal.

## 20 Signs that Walking is Going Places

Millions of Americans are discovering that walking is good for our health, our social lives, our communities, our economic prospects and our overall happiness. Here are some of the recent signs:

1. ***A Miracle Drug*** A September cover story on “The Exercise Cure” in [Time](#) magazine cited brisk walking, and even walking the dog, as the sort of “moderate intensity” workout that “works like a miracle drug”.
2. ***Walkable Streets Benefit Everyone*** *Fast Company*—a magazine renown for staying ahead of the curve on business trends—offered “[50 Reasons Why Everyone Should Want More Walkable Streets](#).” Among their findings: “4) It makes people happier...7) It reduces crime...8) It makes neighborhoods more vital...15) It builds inclusiveness...16) It boosts the economy...18) It makes people more creative and productive...27) It reduces health care costs.”
3. ***More Feet on the Street*** The number of Americans reporting they walk more increased 14 percent in a [2012 USDOT survey of pedestrian behavior](#), compared to a [2002](#) survey. This corroborates numerous local pedestrian counts documenting a rise in walking for transportation, recreation and exercise. Meanwhile the federal [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) points to a six percent increase in the number of Americans walking between 2005 and 2010 (latest figures available). That adds up to 20 million more people on their feet.
4. ***The Path to Prosperity & Social Equity*** The most walkable metropolitan areas in the US are also the most prosperous, with lower levels of social inequity than auto-dependent areas, says a new study by the [George Washington University School of Business](#). Low-income people in walkable neighborhoods spend more on housing but benefit even more from lower transportation costs and better access to jobs. This research also highlights how walkable neighborhoods across the US are

outperforming auto-dependent ones, earning a 90 percent higher premium per square foot on office space rentals and 71 percent more on retail space.

5. ***Lack of Exercise Almost as Deadly as Smoking*** A [groundbreaking study conducted over 50 years](#) shows low levels of physical activity are more lethal than high blood pressure, high cholesterol and other closely-watched medical conditions. “Being Unfit May Be Almost as Bad for You as Smoking,” read a New York Times [headline](#) about the study. These findings affirm an earlier 2014 Cambridge University study showing that [lack of exercise increased the risk of death twice as much as obesity](#) in a 12-year study of 334,000 people.
6. ***Booming Real Estate Trend*** “More and more people want to live where they can walk to stores, cafes, schools and work,” reported [the National Association of Realtors’ magazine](#) earlier this year. Eighty five percent of Americans report that living near places to walk was important to them, and 75 percent said being within an easy walk of shops, parks and other community places was important, according to the organization’s latest [Community Preference and Transportation Survey](#). This is even more true for Millennials, who favor walking as transportation over driving by 12 percentage points.
7. ***Feel Better—and Better About Yourself*** Communities with a high [walkscore](#) show a 95 percent correlation with lower obesity, lower diabetes, healthy eating and people who feel good about their appearance, according to new data from the Gallup Healthways Well-Being Index in their report [Active Living Environments in U.S. Communities](#).
8. ***Crucial Movement Toward Stopping Climate Change*** Every trip you take by foot instead of car is one step toward averting a climate change disaster. Walking is incorporated into more than half of the recommendations in [50 Steps Toward Carbon-Free Transportation](#), a detailed report released in October by the Frontier Group. “Americans prefer walking to any other mode of transportation,” stated the report, noting that “America’s transportation system has emerged as Climate Enemy #1, with cars, trucks and other vehicles now representing the nation’s largest source of carbon pollution.”
9. ***Driverless Cars Can Create Pedestrian-Filled Streets*** Many believe autonomous vehicles will utterly transform modern life over the next 30 years, which could boost the number of people walking in American communities. This can happen if autonomous vehicles become a shared system like taxi cabs, car- and bike-sharing and Netflix rather than being privately owned—a likely outcome because it will be much less expensive. This shift means huge amounts of space in towns and cities would no longer be needed for parking. Sidewalks, public space and bikeways could then be dramatically expanded, allowing everyone walk. Driverless cars would be used primarily for longer or more complicated trips.

“We have to go into this with our eyes open,” warned Vancouver planner Adrian Bell at the [2016 Pro Walk Pro Bike Pro Place](#) conference, saying the public needs to be involved in debates about autonomous vehicles to make sure the drive for auto company profits doesn’t run over this prime opportunity for more livable communities.

**10. *Walking Means Business*** “Two things seem to resonating for businesses about the importance of walkability--how to attract the best workforce and wanting to locate in communities where health costs are lower,” says [Mark Fenton](#), a prominent walking consultant.

Firms in highly competitive fields like technology and marketing have discovered that top talent, especially young people, want to work and live in places a short walk from cafes and cultural attractions, Fenton says. Thomas Schmid of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, adds “If a business is located in a community that is not healthy, they’re paying more to be there. Think of it as a tax or cost of doing business because of health care costs.” Schmid points to Chattanooga, where Volkswagen built a new plant, in part, because they were promised that a popular walk-bike trial would be extended to their campus

**11. *Walking Means Local Business*** Foot traffic is the lifeblood of most business districts, and improvements that make walking easier and safer pay off economically. A street in West Palm Beach, Florida plagued by speeding traffic was made more walk-friendly, resulting in less crime and [\\$300 million](#) in new private investment.

**12. *US Department of Transportation Champions Safe Streets*** The Surgeon General is not the only high-level public official who champions walking. Last year US Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx, former mayor of Charlotte, launched [Safer People, Safer Streets](#) “to help communities create safer, better connected bicycling and walking networks” in response to a steady rise since 2009 in pedestrians killed by motorists. One element of the program was an initiative to help US mayors improve safety on their streets, and this September Foxx honored 13 communities from Oro Valley, AZ to South Bend, IN to Norwalk, CT.

Foxx’s concern about pedestrian issues sprang from his own experiences—he grew up in an African-American neighborhood of Charlotte that was cut up by a freeway, and as mayor he once got [clipped by a car](#) while jogging even though he had the right of way.

**13. *Federal Highway Administration Pushes 80 Percent Cut in Pedestrian Deaths by 2031*** An 80 percent reduction in all pedestrian deaths and serious injuries over the next 15 years is the new goal of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). The same goes for bicyclists. On top of that, the agency is pushing to double the number

of short trips (1 mile for pedestrians; 5 miles for bicyclists) taken by Americans by 2025, which would represent 30 percent of all trips. These priorities are set out in the agency's [Strategic Agenda for Pedestrian and Bicycle Transportation](#), issued in September.

**14. *Vision Zero Movement Hits the Streets*** No pedestrian and bicyclist deaths is the government's ultimate goal over the next 30 years, announced Dan Goodman of the Federal Highway Administration at the [Pro Walk Pro Bike Pro Place](#) conference in September. This mirrors the mission of the Vision Zero grassroots movement, which emerged two years ago in New York City and San Francisco and now is popping up all over the country. Eighteen cities from Fort Lauderdale to Anchorage have formally pledged themselves to eliminating all traffic fatalities (foot, bike, car) and 17 more are exploring the idea, according to the just-launched [Vision Zero Network](#). The movement is inspired by [Sweden's success](#) in reducing road fatalities by 50 percent since 2000, thanks to improved street design and stepped up enforcement of speed limits.

These ambitious plans to eliminate traffic fatalities are appearing just in time. America's streets are actually getting more dangerous. Road fatalities (particularly pedestrian, bicyclist and motorcyclist deaths) for the first six months of 2016 are up [10.4 percent](#) over last year, which recorded the highest spike since 1966. What's the cause? An increase in driving fueled by cheaper gas, along with the ongoing distraction of cell phones in the hands of both drivers and pedestrians is a popular explanation. But Vision Zero advocates point out the deeper problem is that the design of our roads prioritizes drivers' speed and convenience over everyone's safety. "We know that speed is the most critical factor in the severity of a traffic injury," says [Leah Shahum](#), founder and director of the Vision Zero Network. "That means we must bring speeds down to safe levels."

**15. *A Growing Movement to Get Us Back on Our Feet*** A wide coalition of advocates and organizations devoted to better health, social justice, a greener future and community vitality is spreading the word that walking is good for us and our communities. "The health benefits of walking are so overwhelming that to deny access to that is a violation of fundamental human rights," declared Dr. Robert A. Bullard, the father of the Environmental Justice movement in a keynote at the [2015 National Walking Summit](#) held in Washington, DC. More than 500 people from 44 states participated in the summit, 30 percent higher attendance than the first Summit in 2013. The [2017 Summit](#) is September 13-15 in St. Paul, MN, which will be hosted by [America Walks](#) and the [Every Body Walk! Collaborative](#), and sponsored by the [Kaiser Permanente](#) health care system. The theme is "Vibrant and Vital Communities: The Power of Walkability."

**16. *A College for Walking*** Fifty activists from across the US are applying lessons learned at the [Walking College](#) to improve health, equity and economic prospects in their hometowns. Launched by America Walks and led by Ian Thomas, a city council member in Columbia, MO, the program offers practical instruction about walkable

communities, leadership development, fundraising and public policy. One of this year's graduates, Ann Mansfield of the Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative, is starting an Iowa Walking College. To apply for the national Walking College's Class of 2017, contact [Ian Thomas](#).

**17. *Micro-grants to Help Make Your Community More Walkable*** America Walks encourages everyone to apply for their [micro-grant](#) program, which will award 10 to 15 communities \$1,500 each to promote walking. The application deadline is November 18.

**18. *The Case for Healthy Places*** "Your zip code is an important factor to your health. Placemaking is one of the most important drivers of health," explained [Tyler Norris](#), Kaiser Permanente Vice President for Total Health Partnerships, announcing a comprehensive report documenting about what makes a place healthy. Janet Heroux, one of the lead researchers on the project shared five key findings about how to make communities healthier at the Pro Walk Pro Bike Pro Place conference: 1) opportunities for social connection & support ; 2) opportunities for play & active recreation; 3) access to green & natural places; 4) access to healthy food & beverages; 5) access to walking & biking. The report "The Case for Healthy Places", produced by [Project for Public Spaces](#), will be released later this year.

**19. *Walk Audits: A Tool to Make Better Streets*** "I'll give you a warning," walkable communities guru [Dan Burden](#) told a group departing on a walking tour of Vancouver at the Pro Walk Pro Bike Pro Place conference. "You'll never look at streets the same once you've been on a walk audit." Burden, who invented [walk audits](#) while he was Florida's Bike and Pedestrian coordinator, spent the next three hours pointing to the often subtle details that make a big difference in how safe and pleasurable a place is for people on foot. Here's his list of five key things that make walkers fall in love with a place:

- *Transparency*—how appealing buildings and landscapes are to us on the street level;
- *Enclosure* —trees, benches, street parking and other elements that buffer us from moving vehicles;
- *Complexity*—many layers of things to see while strolling down a street;
- *Imageability*—unique features of a place that make it memorable;
- *Human-scale*—a place designed for people, not just cars.

**20. *First Step Toward Reuniting a Divided Nation*** The recent election spotlights how fractured America has become. Thankfully, walking offers a first step toward reconnecting to one another. Sidewalks, streets, trails and other places we travel on foot are common ground—literally. They are among the few places where Americans of all backgrounds can come together face-to-face, giving us the chance to smile, wave, talk, share and get to know someone different than ourselves. It is much harder to to fear, hate, dismiss or ignore fellow citizens you cross paths with every day.

## America's Walking Renaissance

Get a free [pdf download](#) of a new book detailing the best tips and strategies to help Americans walk more, and highlighting unexpected success stories across the country. The book chronicles how the walking movement is gaining ground all across the country—in suburbs and small towns as well as big cities and college towns:

- In Baldwin Park, a racially diverse suburb of LA, high levels of childhood obesity are dropping as the result of a community-wide effort to make walking more safe and comfortable. Two major avenues criss-crossing this town (pop. 75,000) will be transformed from high-speed corridors to “living streets” where walkers, bicyclists and transit users will be given equality priority with motorists.
- In Batesville, AR, and Albert Lea, MN, improvements to boost walking around town are paying off in new residents, businesses and hope for the future. Pedestrian traffic is up 69 percent in downtown Albert Lea (pop. 18,000), which has attracted \$2 million dollars of new investment since being made more walk-friendly. Batesville (pop. 10,000) widened sidewalks and lowered speed limits downtown, which saved the once-failing business district.
- In Birmingham AL, a growing network of walking trails helps address problems arising from decades of economic decline, racial inequity and declining public health. Health care institutions, the United Way and county government partnered to create a Safe Routes to Schools program and the local initiative Walk Bham.
- In Arlington, VA, an innovative plan to transform neighborhoods into foot-friendly villages made it America's Most Walkable Suburb. “Arlington is becoming a place where people matter more than cars,” says local lawyer Peter Owens. “It's not just possible to walk here, it's safe and comfortable to walk.”
- In Phoenix, ambitious programs to encourage walking are part of a push to become America's healthiest city. Phoenix Children's Hospital, city council member (and firefighter) Daniel Valenzuela and grassroots activists are major players in plans to improve sidewalks and create walking routes in the city's numerous parks.
- In St. Paul, a multicultural community torn apart by freeway construction seeks revival and healing through better pedestrian connections. A [bottom-up organizing campaign](#) has generated many innovative ideas, including a proposal to build a park over the freeway that is getting serious attention from state officials
- In Northeast Iowa, small town kids are getting excited about walking to and at school. Walking school buses, walking trails to schools built outside town, and popular after-school walking clubs are all part of the fun.

- In Seattle, groundbreaking policies curb speeding motorists and prevent traffic crashes. Lower speed limits on residential streets, stronger traffic law enforcement, red light cameras and plans to build more sidewalks all make this one of America's best cities for walking
- In African-American communities coast-to-coast, [GirlTrek](#) encourages women to take charge of their health by walking regularly. "The leading cause of death for black women is heart disease," says co-founder Vanessa Garrison. "We are dying younger and at higher rates from preventable diseases than any group of women in this country."
- In California's Central Valley, Latino parents are organizing campaigns to make streets hospitable for people on foot. In the town of Ceres (pop. 45,000), where 2/3 of residents are overweight, sixth graders detailed poor walking conditions near their school, resulting in new trails and other walk-to-school improvements.
- In Indianapolis, leaders from around the world come to study the Cultural Trail—a 21<sup>st</sup> century walk-and-bike corridor winding the central city that has reinvigorated a number of struggling business districts.
- In Greater Philadelphia, the Circuit network of walking and bike trails link the entire region—300 miles so far with 450 more planned. By 2040, half of all households in the metropolitan area will be within a mile's walk of a Circuit trail
- Even in [Oklahoma City](#), named America's "Worst Walking City" in 2008, big plans are underway to make life on foot easier, less dangerous and more fun. Hundreds of miles of sidewalks and recreational trails have already been constructed. Republican mayor Mick Cornett says, "Young millennials who want to walk and bike are arriving in numbers never seen before. We are creating a city where your kids and grandkids will choose to stay."