

A group of people walking on a grassy field, viewed from the waist down. The image is framed by a large, textured magenta overlay that resembles torn paper or a paint splash. The people are wearing various casual clothing: jeans, shorts, and sneakers. The background shows a green field under a clear sky.

# America's Walking Renaissance

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How cities, suburbs & towns  
are getting back on their feet

**BY JAY WALLJASPER, HEIDI SIMON & KATE KRAFT**

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# Contributors



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Jay Walljasper—author of *The Great Neighborhood Book*—writes, speaks and consults widely about how communities, businesses, government and neighbors

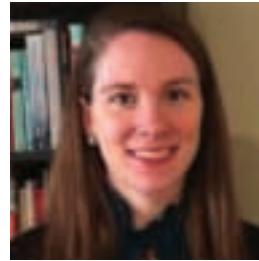
can create better places for everyone to live. Editor of *Utne Reader* magazine for 15 years, he is now a Senior Fellow at Project for Public Spaces, Urban Writer-in-Residence at Augsburg College and a Contributing Editor at *Yes! Magazine*. He is also author of *How to Design Our World for Happiness* and *All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons*, and lives in Minneapolis.



**Kate Kraft**

Kate Kraft is the National Coalition Director for the Every Body Walk! Collaborative and America Walks. Kate is one of the founding architects of the active living

movement and through the years has worked with dozens of communities, public organizations and foundations to develop healthy community initiatives and preventive health care grant portfolios. Kate's academic work focuses on relationships between the built environment and health outcomes. She received her Ph.D. from Bryn Mawr College School of Social Work & Social Research and resides in New Jersey.



**Heidi Simon**

Heidi Simon, America Walks' Communications and Public Affairs Manager, has worked in the non-profit sector for many years developing communication strategy and

maintaining external relations for a broad portfolio of clients. Heidi has had the opportunity work with government officials and some of the major decision-makers in the corporate and nonprofit world. Originally from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Heidi holds degrees from Loyola University Chicago and George Washington University and currently lives in Las Vegas.



**Tyler Norris**

For over three decades, Tyler Norris, MDiv. has served as a social entrepreneur and trusted advisor to philanthropies, health systems, governments, NGO's

and collaborative partnerships working to improve the health of people and places and drive equitable prosperity. His work in the public, private, non-profit and civic sectors has included initiatives with over 400 communities and organizations in the United States and internationally. Tyler now serves as Vice President, Total Health Partnerships at Kaiser Permanente – the leading integrated health delivery system in the United States, where he leads “anchor institution” work to apply all KP assets for impact at scale. Tyler can often be seen late afternoons in walking meetings around Lake Merritt in his adopted home of Oakland, and is an active supporter (and former Executive Director) of the Abraham Path Initiative, creating a walking route and path of cultural discovery across the Middle East.



### **The Every Body Walk! Collaborative**

The Every Body Walk! Collaborative is an alliance of hundreds of national, state and local organizations that are leading the walking revolution. A partnership of diverse organizations, the EBWC is dedicated to making walking and walkability a valued part of every community. It is collectively committed to increasing rates of walking and physical activity, and increasing equitable access to safe places to walk, roll and be active—by empowering walking champions everywhere. The EBWC, powered by Kaiser Permanente, does this by driving changes in behavior, built environment and culture through communications, Walking Summits, local action and research. It serves as a network for sharing resources and strengthening collaboration. It frames messages that are shared across the partners and their networks. The EBWC serves as a national voice that articulates the multiple benefits of walking and walkability, and making the case for more resources.



### **America Walks**

America Walks, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit national organization, is leading the way in making America a great place to walk. It provides a voice for walking and walkable communities with federal agencies; provides strategy support, training and technical assistance to statewide, regional, and local organizations; and serves as the convener of the national Every Body Walk! Collaborative. Together, America Walks and the Every Body Walk! Collaborative boast 700 allied organizations across the nation working to increase walking and make America a better place to walk.



# Every Body Walk!

INTRODUCTION BY TYLER NORRIS

Walking is one of the simplest human acts, but it carries profound benefits for physical and mental health, as well as the vitality of communities where we live, work, learn and play.

For decades, we have known the many health benefits of moderate to vigorous physical activity, including brisk walking. Over time, increasing rates of physical activity can directly improve health outcomes and reduce preventable demand for medical care services—in the process, helping make access to health care more affordable for all. Walking is not only beneficial for our health and well being, it can also play an important role in improving our quality of life. It helps protect and improve our living environments and natural resources.

So, what can be done to make sure these benefits reach as many people as possible? One answer: build a walking movement.

For years Kaiser Permanente has been a strong public voice in promoting a culture of health where physical activity is a primary component in promoting the well-being of body, mind, and spirit; preventing disease; and creating healthier workplaces, schools and communities.

In 2010, sparked by then-CEO George Halvorson, Kaiser Permanente made a commitment to create and amplify a national conversation about walking. Halvorson understood that when you look at all of the options available for improving health, one behavioral change that has both the highest potential to have an impact and the highest potential to actually be done by people is – very simply – walking. Beginning with the Every Body Walk! Campaign and, later, the Every Body Walk! Collaborative (EBWC), we were able to engage a talented group of diverse partners across many sectors. Many of these groups were not focused on walking per se, but saw the opportunity to link walking to their missions. By working together toward the common goal of getting more people walking and creating more walk-

able places, this new alliance of partners set out to make the best case for increased investment at all levels to promote walking, rolling and other forms of physical activity.

Our approach for building the walking movement is modeled on other successful social movements, which could be tested and brought to market for wider distribution. For us, this means “distributing” behavior change so that walking becomes the “new normal” for tens of millions of people. The goals we adopted embrace both demand and supply: more people walking, encouraged by more safe places to walk.

First, we needed to discover what was in place and what was missing in the existing context. What was limiting progress? What was needed to reach all the convergent organizations that support walking? What combination of research, messaging, policies, systems analysis and environmental changes could be optimally applied to help forge a genuine social movement?

Not surprisingly, we found that a primary gap was engaging the leaders of organizations. Leadership matched by action was needed inside organizations (like ours) if we were to “walk the talk” and gain credibility to work at the national level. And then even more leadership was needed to unite scattered efforts into an aligned force, where a diverse array of assets and constituencies can be tapped.

At Kaiser Permanente, we started by encouraging our workforce to walk more, via the KP Walk program. We also engaged our members and customers by implementing *exercise a vital sign* at every medical appointment. We also created materials for practitioners to write prescriptions for walking and visiting parks. We then spread this effort to thousands of schools in communities served by Kaiser Permanente through the Thriving Schools and Fire Up Your Feet programs. The learning and investment in these efforts gave us a more solid footing to engage with external partners in expanding Every Body Walk! across the nation.

These early results were encouraging, and helped motivate some of our partners to initiate their own campaigns. We also affirmed that a key missing ingredient in boosting “demand” for walking is the inadequate “supply” of safe places to travel by foot, especially in disinvested neighborhoods, and for vulnerable populations. So the EBWC partners tackled the fact that many individuals *want* to walk and roll (in wheelchairs, on bikes, with strollers etc.) *but cannot* because streets are not safe, sidewalks are missing or damaged, and neighborhoods are not well lit. This recognition led us to double down on promoting “walkability” through needed investments in neighborhoods and changing existing policies and systems to remove barriers to walking. In the process, we realized changes to the built environment could also generate many complementary benefits to communities—economic, environmental and social.

In 2012, at the biennial [Pro Walk, Pro Bike, Pro Place](#) conference in Long Beach, hosted by Project for Public Spaces, more than two dozen walking advocates met to discuss the formation of a social movement, which would adopt a “distributed leadership” model, to work on the local, state and national levels. Participants included the [Safe Routes to School National Partnership](#), [Rails-To-Trails Conservancy](#), the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), [America Walks](#), [Smart Growth America](#), the [Alliance for Biking and Walking](#), the [American College of Sports Medicine](#), [GirlTrek](#) and others. Within a few months, we convened again in Washington DC at the [Kaiser Permanente Center for Total Health](#). This time, with 140 individuals from scores of organizations across many fields, from health care to civil rights to business.

Among the many exciting developments at that meeting was a public commitment announced by then US Surgeon General Regina Benjamin to initiate a Call to Action on walking and walkability. Three years later, her pledge was fulfilled by Surgeon General Vivek Murthy in the release of the [Call to Action to Promote Walking and Walkable](#)



Communities. Between those years, the EBWC grew by engaging [America Walks](#) to serve as the national backbone organization, and we hosted walking summits in 2013 and 2015 in Washington, DC.

As America's premier walking association, America Walks was a natural choice to serve as the springboard for a movement dedicated to impact at scale. The EBWC now hosts committees focused on creating and spreading compelling communications; advancing research; advising on local, state and federal policy; and coalescing a widespread force capable of getting people across the country up and moving.

Over the past five years, many thousands of individuals, and hundreds of organizations, in every corner of our nation have helped bring Every Body Walk! and the walking movement to scale, visibility and impact. In the process, we have seen early progress, as documented in increasing rates of physical activity, and increased equitable access to places where everyone feels safe to be active.

*The Walking Renaissance*, created by [The Every Body Walk! Collaborative](#) and written by our friends and colleagues Jay Walljasper, Kate Kraft and Heidi Simon, shines a bright light on this national effort to encourage more people to walk and to create more walkable places. It highlights people who are making big differences in their communities, and shows how they do it.

By showcasing what is happening in cities and towns around the nation, we hope you'll discover new opportunities to boost the health of people and places in the years ahead.

This book shows how any community can walk and spotlights the local heroes who make it happen. But our work is far from done. Among the movement's key priorities now is improving road safety. An estimated 4,500 pedestrians and cyclists are killed by cars every year. We also need to curb the displacement of residents by gentrification, which is sometimes linked to the increased walkability of neighborhoods. We also need to increase people's access to nature, especially youth and seniors in lower-income communities.

Walking is the gateway to increased physical activity, and a stimulus to safer, more livable and equitably prosperous communities. Walking is a direct contributor to a society that thrives in every dimension. This work is changing the national conversation about walking, and beginning to spark effective action. And we are just getting going! Join us.



This book is dedicated to the life and work of our dear friend and partner **Deb Hubsmith**. An active walker, bike rider, dancer, yogini, community activist, policy advocate and founder of the [Safe Routes to School National Partnership](#), Deb touched many people directly—and millions more who benefit daily from her work, but will never know her. Her contagious tenacity (like water she always found her way) eroded the mental and fiscal barriers that stood in the way of making safe walking and biking routes common in American communities. In addition to many local, state and national roles, Deb was the founding Co-Chair of the Every Body Walk! Collaborative. With this book, we celebrate her beautiful, powerful, too-short life. We will continue this important work with the open-hearted, courageous spirit that Deb showed us.

—TYLER NORRIS

*To learn more about Deb and support her work,  
please visit the Safe Routes to School National Partnership website [here](#).*



# Acknowledgments

This book owes its existence to people from all walks of life working hard to make their communities more walkable because they understand that moving on foot (or rolling) is a basic human drive that contributes so much to making each of us healthy, happy and whole.

In addition to the many walking champions highlighted and quoted in the following pages, we'd like to thank other walking champions who were particularly helpful in bringing this book to life.

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# The Good Life is Closer Than You Ever Dreamed

PREFACE BY JAY WALLJASPER

Imagine living in one of America's great walkable communities.

Your day begins with a stroll—saying hi to neighbors, noticing blooming gardens or eye-catching shop windows, maybe stopping for a treat on your way to work.

Weekends are even better. You step out your door and join the hum of activity along the sidewalk en route to a coffeeshop, park, shopping district, friend's home, recreation center or house of worship.

These walks offer opportunities to reflect on your life (more vitality and creativity now that you're not driving all the time), your community (more alive and welcoming now that everyone walks more) and your family (healthier, happier and more relaxed). Even driving is more fun than it used to be with fewer cars clogging the streets.

You don't have to move out of town or trade up to a more expensive neighborhood to enjoy these pleasures. Any community can become more walkable if a few people are willing to stand up to make a difference. Here are inspiring stories of places where this is happening right now, and of people who are getting things started in neighborhoods not so different from where you live.



## Walking is Good For You in Surprising Ways

We've always known walking is good for us—it burns calories, reduces stress and strengthens muscles.

But we never knew how really great it is for us until the 2015 [Call to Action on Walking](#) from U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy.

“Walking is a simple, effective and affordable way to build physical activity into our lives,” Murthy declared. “That is why we need to step it up as a country ensuring that everyone can choose to walk in their own communities.”

The [landmark report](#)—which is being compared to the Surgeon General's 1964 warning on the dangers of smoking—is based on definitive [medical evidence](#)

that moderate physical exercise boosts your health and cuts your chances of diabetes, dementia, depression, colon cancer, cardiovascular disease, anxiety and high blood pressure by [40 percent](#) or more.

Murthy announced a [national campaign](#) to encourage Americans to walk more and make all communities safer and easier for walking. His office will partner with schools, citizens' groups and businesses to meet these goals.

A [major study](#) released this year shows that lack of exercise is twice as deadly as obesity, according to Cambridge University researchers who studied more than 300,000 people over a period of 12 years. Their findings match another [comprehensive study](#) that found sitting for long periods is linked to higher death rates.



The federal Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that Americans walk at least 30 minutes a day five days a week—or bike, run, swim, dance,

garden, do aerobics and play sports. (For kids, it's 60 minutes a day seven days a week.) Taking a walk is the exercise that people stick with most over time, according to the American Heart Association.

## Other benefits of a daily stroll

The rising interest in walking across America also promises numerous benefits beyond better health.

### Lower healthcare costs

Physical inactivity costs Americans an estimated \$177 billion a year for medical costs, and accounts for 16 percent of all deaths, according to the American Public Health Association.

### More social connections

Taking a walk is one of the best ways to meet new neighbors and deepen ties with those you already know. Fostering these kinds of social connections is an additional boost to our physical and mental well-being.

### Stronger sense of community

“Exercise is medicine. It’s also good for the social fabric of our communities,” says Dr. Regina Benjamin, U.S. Surgeon General from 2009 to 2013, explaining why she added a walking path to the grounds of her health clinic in rural Alabama. “Health does not just happen in doctors’ offices and clinics—it happens where we work, live, play and pray.”

### Better school performance

Walking to school boosts cognitive performance in students, according to Mary Pat King, the National PTA’s director of programs and partnerships. Dr. Richard Jackson, a pediatrician and former environmental health director at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control stresses that walking to school is good for children’s learning ability, concentration, mood and creativity.

### More creativity & reduced anxiety

Eighty-five percent of Americans believe that walking helps reduce anxiety and feelings of depression, and two-thirds of Americans report that walking “stimulates their thinking” according to a national survey. American philosopher Henry David Thoreau agrees: “The moment my legs begin to move, my thoughts begin to flow,” he wrote in his journal.

### Improved mental and spiritual well-being

Putting one foot in front of the other is good for our minds and souls as well as our bodies. “To solve a problem, walk around,” advised St. Jerome in the 4th century. The Buddhist philosopher Thich Nhat Hanh observes, “Every time we take a step on this earth, we can appreciate the solid ground underneath us.” The Bible counsels, “Ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.” (Jeremiah 6:16)

### Healthier local economies

Communities with many walkable neighborhoods do better economically than those with just a few, according to a report from the George Washington University School of Business. “Walking is a business issue,” adds Karen Marlo, vice president of the National Business Group on Health, an alliance of large companies. “A healthy workforce means a more successful workforce. It’s important for businesses to share effective ways to get employees to walk more.”



▲ US Surgeon General Vivek K. Murthy's Call to Action on Walking & Walkability encourages everyone to get up and take a walk.



▲ Former Surgeon General Regina Benjamin built a walking path at her Alabama clinic to increase social interaction in the community.

### Lower cost of living

Transportation costs rival housing costs for many American families today, especially those living in places where it is hard get around without a car (25 percent of household expenses) compared with walkable communities (9 percent), according to the Federal Highway Administration.

### Higher quality of life

Walk with a Doc, a group of more than 200 doctors in 29 states, documents 100 benefits of walking, which includes many medical advantages, but also

increased physical energy, clearer skin, improved athletic performance, reduced anger, increased self-control, longer lives and a greater sense of well-being.

—JAY WALLJASPER







# Everybody has a Right to Walk

“The health benefits of walking are so overwhelming that to deny access to that is a violation of fundamental human rights,” declared Robert D. Bullard, credited as father of the environmental justice movement.

“Tell me your zip code and I can tell you how healthy you are,” said Bullard, dean of the School of Public Affairs at Texas Southern University, in a keynote at the second National Walking Summit held in October 2015 in Washington, D.C.

“That should not be. ... All communities should have a right to a safe, sustainable, healthy, just, walkable community.”

Jaw-dropping silence seized the room as Bullard showed a succession of maps illustrating how patterns of historic racial segregation and current poverty strongly correlate with low levels of walking and high levels of obesity, diabetes, hypertension and heart disease.

“Health disparities don’t just happen by accident,” he explained. They are the tragic legacy of racism and unequal economic opportunity. Being able to walk safely, Bullard pointed out, is literally a matter of life and death. “Research shows that walking can give you seven more years of life,” he said.

It is a stark fact that children, older Americans, the poor, people of color and people with disabilities are injured or killed more often while walking (or rolling, in the case of people using wheelchairs and motorized carts).

▷ People walking in the poorest one-third of urban census tracts are twice as likely to be killed by cars.

▷ African Americans are 60 percent more likely to be killed by cars while walking, and Latinos 43 percent.

▷ The pedestrian fatality rate rises significantly for people 45 and over, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

▷ Roughly half of all U.S. kids walked or biked to school in 1970, compared to 16 percent today (up from 13 percent in 2007), according to Safe Routes to School National Partnership.

Many disadvantaged people now think twice before traveling on foot due to dangerous traffic, crumbling sidewalks, street crime, or a lack of stores and public places within walking distance. Poor conditions for walking among low-income households, people of color and some immigrant communities limit their access to jobs and education. One-third of all African Americans and one-quarter of all Latinos live without access to a car, according to a report by the Leadership Conference Education Fund which means walking and public transit (which involves a walk) represent important pathways to opportunity.

“A big thing we could do to help low-income families is to make it easier to live without a car. And it would help middle-class families to switch from two cars to one,” says Gil Penalosa, founder of 880 Cities and an immigrant from Colombia. He notes that the average cost of owning and operating one car is about \$8,500 a year.





▲ Dr. Robert Bullard, founder of the environmental justice movement, explains that your zip code is a better indicator of health than your blood pressure.

In addition to traffic injuries, there's a stigma in low-income communities that people on foot are "losers," explains Yolanda Savage-Narva, director of health equity at the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials. Growing up in an African American community in Mississippi, Savage-Narva recalls, "It wasn't normal to walk. It was something that only really poor people did."

How you travel looms large as an emotional issue in disadvantaged communities, according to Penalosa. "Walking is seen as a symbol of failure. And you can see why when you look at the places where many people are forced to walk—deteriorating infrastructure, dangerous intersections. It's like we are telling these people every day that they are second-class citizens."

Anita Hairston, associate director and transportation specialist at [Policy Link](#), a national institute focused on social equity, offers another reason straight out of today's headlines to explain why many African Americans and Latinos are wary about taking a stroll. "The issue of racial profiling is front and center. Who's got the right to be on the streets? If a group of young black men are dressed casually, people think: Where is this gang going? What are they going to do? Not everyone has the same experience on the street."

Despite all these roadblocks, people in disadvantaged communities still walk more than other Americans. "The fact is that we have twice as many low-income children who are walking or biking to school than those in affluent neighborhoods, even lacking the infrastructure to protect the children who walk and bicycle," reports Keith Benjamin, Community Partnerships Manager for the [Safe Routes to School National Partnership](#).

The good news is that the right to walk is becoming a major issue, as advocates for social justice, public health, neighborhood revitalization and other causes push for policies to make walking safer and easier in communities all across America. In fact, secretary of transportation Anthony Foxx, the former mayor of Charlotte, has made it one of his top priorities with the [Safer People, Safer Streets](#) initiative to help everyone walk and bike more.

Diverse communities, from inner-city Washington, D.C., to the Central Valley of California, are pioneering new programs that make sure that everyone can enjoy the benefits of walking. As Ron Sims, an activist in the African American neighborhoods of Seattle and former deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, notes, "If



▲ Keith Benjamin of the Safe Routes to Schools National Partnership points out that twice as many low-income kids walk to school as middle class kids.

you have parks, playgrounds, community gardens, and wide sidewalks, you have good health outcomes. If you have walkable communities, kids will do better in school ... seniors will be healthier.”

Here are some examples:

### African American communities from Oakland to Philadelphia

A little-publicized crisis for African Americans is the high rate of heart disease and diabetes, especially among women, says Vanessa Garrison, co-founder of the health empowerment program *GirlTrek*. “The leading cause of death for black women is heart disease,” Garrison says. “We are dying younger and at higher rates from preventable diseases than any group of women in this country. Eighty percent of black women are overweight. Half of all black girls born in 2000 will get diabetes by 2034 if present trends continue.”

*Girl Trek* aims to improve black women’s health by organizing communities to walk, even in places where sidewalks are absent and crime rates are high. “Walking is not just for folks in Portland and Boston,” Garrison says. More than 35,000 African American women have taken *Girl Trek*’s pledge to re-establish walking as a healing tradition in inner-city neighborhoods, from Oakland to Jackson, Mississippi, to Philadelphia.

### Washington, D.C.

Fifteen to 20 women in Anacostia, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., take an invigorating 3.3-mile walk on Saturday mornings as part the Just Walk club sponsored by the neighborhood’s Community Wellness Collective. “People here have this idea that exercise is just for people with money, people with time,” says public health consultant Khadijah Tribble. “That’s why we walk. To show that’s not true.”

### Chicago

A flock of walkers can be spotted every Thursday evening on the sidewalks of West Humboldt Park, a largely African American and Latino neighborhood

▼ More than 35,000 women across the US now walk regularly as part of *GirlTrek*.



on the West Side of Chicago. They’re participating in walking clubs, organized to increase walking and improve community health, sponsored by the West Humboldt Park Development Council (WHPDC).

“This area has one of the higher diabetes rates in the nation,” explains Isaiah Ross, until recently WHPDC’s community development manager. “People haven’t walked much here because the traffic makes it hard to get to school or work, and people are afraid to go out because they don’t know their neighbors.”

The group’s Healthy Community Initiative aims to break down people’s isolation, first by bringing people together, and then tackling issues that discourage healthy lifestyles. Groups of eight to ten people are being organized to conduct walk audits in their neighborhoods. “Are the crosswalks visible at intersections? ... What can be done to slow down traffic? What’s a safe route for kids to go to school?” are among the conditions they study, according to Ross.



## Richmond, California

More African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans now live in suburbs than in cities. The same is true for low-income people. And disadvantaged suburban residents often experience even greater problems getting around than city dwellers because of spotty public transit, lack of sidewalks, and wide streets with few pedestrian safety protections, as well as greater walking distances to destinations.

Almost 20 percent of the population of Richmond, a suburban city of 100,000 in the East Bay region of California, lives below the poverty line. The city's struggling Iron Triangle neighborhood—which is approximately two-thirds African American and one-third Latino—has long suffered from economic disinvestment and high crime rates, says Dan Burden, a walkability expert at Blue Zones. Local people seeking to improve this neighborhood are working to make neighborhood routes to the park safe for pedestrians by improving street design to encourage slow traffic and to create a more appealing environment for walking. “This is creating a place filled with lots of things for people to do, where gangs will not go to sell drugs or bully everyone,” Burden says.

## The Central Valley of California

In rural America—which is poorer on average than urban regions, and where one in five residents is Latino, African American or Native American—walking is more common than most people think. Even with long distances to destinations and very limited public transit, 1.6 million rural households do not have access to cars.

In Winton (pop. 10,000), a largely Latino town in California's Central Valley, parents were concerned that kids walking or biking to school were endangered by traffic congestion and lack of sidewalks. The school district responded by declaring walk-to-school day, teaching classes about pedestrian safety and creating Safe Routes to School policies.

In the San Joaquin Valley, where one in three children are overweight, Latina women started walking groups to improve their families' health. When local officials said it would cost too much to build walking trails, they enlisted their construction-worker husbands to do it. The next step is for the grassroots group, which calls itself Cultiva La Salud (“Cultivating Health”), says member Genoveva Islas, is to study how traffic calming, bike lanes and better sidewalks can improve their lives.

In nearby Ceres, California (pop. 45,000), where two-thirds of all people are overweight, sixth-graders did an assessment of walking conditions near local schools. Their recommendations were incorporated into a Safe Routes to School master plan for the community. Five local schools have established walking school buses, in which parents go from door to door picking up kids and walking them safely to school.

## Clarksdale, Mississippi

Older African Americans in this community (pop. 18,000) felt scared to walk because of crime. “Folks barricaded themselves in their homes,” explained Ivory Craig, associate state AARP director, until they organized neighborhood watch groups to make their community safer for walking.

—JAY WALLJASPER



# Americans Rediscover the Joy of Walking

Humans' most common pastime—forsaken for decades as too slow and too much effort—is finally being recognized as a health breakthrough, an economic catalyst and a route to happiness. Evidence of America's growing interest in walking can be found everywhere from the real estate market to music videos.

▷ In Fall 2015, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy announced a call to action urging Americans to walk more, which medical studies show prevents diseases ranging from diabetes and heart disease to depression and dementia by rates of 40 percent or more.

▷ A recent national poll from the National Association of Realtors finds that 79 percent of Americans believe it's important to live "within an easy walk" of places they want to go.

▷ *Real Simple* magazine (circ. 2 million) declared walking "America's untrendiest trend" in a cover story.

▷ The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) set a daily minimum for walking and other forms of physical activity: 30 minutes a day five days a week for adults, and 60 minutes seven days a week for kids.

▷ The sheer pleasure of walking is highlighted in one of the top music videos of recent years, "Happy" by soul singer Pharrell Williams. It's an exuberant celebration of life on foot showing all kinds of people (including Magic Johnson, Steve Carrell, Stevie Wonder and Jimmy Kimmel) strutting, stepping, striding and sashaying down city streets. It's been viewed 828 million times on YouTube, prompting Williams to release a 24-hour version.

▶ Pharrell Williams' "Happy" video captures the sheer pleasure of moving your body.



▷ Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx announced an all-out effort to make walking safer across America. “Bicycling and walking are as important as any other form of transportation,” he says, noting how little federal policy has focused on pedestrian and bike safety until now.

▷ Health care providers are embracing walking as a vital sign of health. Bernard J. Tyson, CEO of the 10-million member integrated health system Kaiser Permanente network, advises, “You don’t have to be an athlete to be physically active, just walk, walk, walk!”

▷ Paul Herberling of the U.S. Department of Transportation notes that 10.4 percent of all trips Americans make are on foot—and 28 percent of trips that are under a mile. For young people, it’s 17 percent of all trips. Americans walk most frequently for exercise, errands and recreation, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

▷ “Walking is the most common form of physical activity across incomes and ages and education levels,” explains Thomas Schmid of the federal Centers for



▲ Transportation Sec. Anthony Foxx (left) walks with Missouri Sen. Claire McCaskill to an event celebrating pedestrian improvements at the St. Louis Arch.

Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC’s recent research shows the number of Americans who take a walk at least once a week rose from 56 percent in 2005 to 62 percent in 2010—which represents almost 20 million more people on their feet.

## Why is walking suddenly so popular?

What’s driving American’s growing passion for walking? “It’s a convergence of factors,” explains Christopher Leinberger, an author on walkable communities, real estate developer and George Washington University business professor:

▷ **The link between walking and better health**, which is reinforced by recent research pointing to the dangers of sitting for long periods. A comprehensive study charting 240,000 Americans between ages 50 and 71 published in the *Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that “overall sitting [time] was associated with all-cause mortality.”

▷ **The costs of owning one, two or more cars**, which many Americans, especially younger people, find a poor investment of their resources. Transportation is now the highest cost in family budgets (19 percent) next to housing (32 percent).

▷ **Metropolitan areas with many walkable neighborhoods do better economically** than those with just a few. Leinberger’s recent report *Foot Traffic Ahead* finds that walkable metropolitan areas “have substantially higher GDPs per capita” as well as a higher percentage of college graduates.

▷ **More people discovering the personal satisfactions of walking**. “Seeing friends on the street, walking to work, strolling out for dinner or night-life,” are among the pleasures of walking that enrich our lives, says Leinberger.

—JAY WALLJASPER





# 15 Easy Steps to Health & Happiness

Walking is great for our health, improves our mood and is fun in itself. It costs nothing, and is convenient to do almost any time or place. Seventy-nine percent of Americans believe they should walk more.

Yet 52 percent of us don't get the recommended weekly minimum of walking or other physical activity: 30 minutes a day five times a week (60 minutes for kids). This rate of inactivity is even higher for women, seniors, type-2 diabetics and residents of the South and Midwest.

Here are some simple tips on making it easier to walk.

## 1. Find your natural rhythm

Figure out the best times to walk for your schedule. Maybe it's first thing in the morning. With your kids on the way to school. Taking the dog out. Before bed-time. With friends.

## 2. Seize the opportunity whenever you can

Take the stairs instead of an elevator. Park a few blocks from your destination. Ride transit (which involves a walk on both ends of the trip). Swap the drive to the gym for a hike around the neighborhood. Run errands on foot. It all adds up.

Pay attention to other ways you can incorporate walking into your daily life, rather than treating it as one more thing added to your crowded schedule. Studies show we stick with exercise more when it's a regular part of our day, rather than a leisure time activity. Vanessa Garrison, co-founder of the African American women's walking organization GirlTrek, says, "I have the pleasure of walking every day to the store, the dry cleaners, the post office, to the park with my husband."



▲ Vanessa Garrison, co-founder of GirlTrek.

### 3. Start small

Be realistic in your goals. The CDC's recommended minimum—30 minutes a day—makes a good beginning. Do it in two or three separate trips if you need to, then work your way up to longer distances.

### 4. Keep track of your progress

A pedometer, phone app or other device that keeps tabs on how far you walk every day can be a handy tool. Fitness experts recommend 10,000 steps a day, but that will vary depending on personal factors. Americans on average walk about 5,110 steps a day—about half as many as Australians, who live in a similarly car-oriented society.

### 5. Identify walking as your sport

Walkers are athletes too. It's good exercise and an enjoyable pastime the same as biking, running, or basketball. Claim it as your sport, and you'll do it more often. Solidify your commitment by taking the walking pledge.

### 6. Make sure your route is enjoyable

Wear walking gear that is comfortable. Find a route that is interesting, perhaps with a favorite destination like a coffee shop, park or a great view. "If you're

slogging through something you don't enjoy, you won't stick with it," says David W. Brock, assistant professor of exercise and movement science at the University of Vermont.

### 7. Weave walking into your social life

Suggest a walking "date" with your partner, friends or family. Instead of meeting someone for lunch, a drink, or a movie—begin the occasion with a walk before you sit down together. Or invite dinner guests to stroll around the block after a meal.

In New York City, it's a long-standing tradition for folks to walk together through Central Park or along the Brooklyn Promenade. In San Antonio, people regularly stroll the Riverwalk. What would be the equivalent place in your town?

Most people's vacations are built around walks—hiking in the woods or mountains, ambling on the beach, strolling through historic neighborhoods, wandering through theme parks or the state fair. Why not maintain that holiday spirit all year by regularly walking with family and friends.

### 8. Create a neighborhood promenade

A walk after dinner is an enduring custom in many countries. Italians call it a passeggiata, in Latin America it's the paseo, in Germany the spaziergang. In the English-speaking world, it's the promenade. People generally follow the same route through town, making it a social occasion as much as an exercise regimen.

You can designate your own route through the neighborhood. Here's how, according to architect and influential design theorist Christopher Alexander (author of *A Pattern Language*):

▷ The route should be approximately 1,500 feet, which can easily be walked in 10 minutes at a leisurely pace. People may opt for many times around—especially teenagers on the lookout for excitement or romance—but don't make the course too long for little kids or elderly people.

▷ It's important that there are things to see and do along the route, with no empty or dead zones of more than 150 feet. While the primary purpose of these strolls is social, people also like to have some destination: a sidewalk café, playground, bookstore, ice cream shop, etc.

## 9. Be prepared for weather

When rain, snow, cold or heat hit, make sure you have the right clothes to keep going. New fabrics and gear can keep you comfortable in even the most challenging weather. Or discover an indoor walking route at a recreation center or mall.

Actually, weather has less effect on walking than you'd think. In rainy, chilly Seattle, 9.1 percent of commuters travel on foot, according to [census data](#), compared with 2.9 percent in San Diego, which has 100 fewer days of rain each year. In snowy Syracuse, NY, 10.4 percent walk to work compared with 1.4 percent in mild Jacksonville, Florida. In frigid Minneapolis, it's 6.4 percent compared with 1.8 percent in Dallas, where the January high averages 57 degrees. Indeed, Minnesota ranks second in the nation for walking during the summer, and a surprising [fifth in the winter](#).

## 10. Try a walking meeting

Instead of gathering around a table, walk around the block—you'll likely see a spike in people's creativity and attention. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey both favor [walking meetings](#), as did Steve Jobs, Sigmund Freud, Charles Dickens and Aristotle. Prominent corporate consultant Nilofer Merchant explains how it works in her [TED Talk](#).

Since 80 percent of Americans get virtually [no physical activity](#) in their jobs, this could be a giant boost for the nation's health.

Also, try walking around your home or workplace while talking on the phone.

## 11. Organize a walking group

"If you want to go fast, walk alone; if you want to go far, walk together," says an African proverb. Round up co-workers for a lunchtime hike. Grab the neighbors for an evening stroll. You'll walk more often and more merrily when you share the journey. Think of it as a book club with no homework.

Thirty walking groups were launched in [Albert Lea, Minnesota](#), in 2009 as part of a community-wide campaign to improve health. More than half are still going, with four to ten people meeting to walk three to seven times a week. [Girl Trek](#), a growing

▼ Walking is a year-round pastime as these folks in Keene, New Hampshire know.





organization dedicated to help African American women stay in shape, has launched walking groups from Oakland to Jackson, Mississippi, to Philadelphia, involving more than 10,000 women.

## 12. Launch a Jane's Walk

Jane Jacobs, an author and activist who stood up to stop a highway planned for her New York neighborhood in the 1960s, is the godmother of the movement to make our communities more livable. She died in 2006, but her legacy lives on in Jane's Walks, where folks in neighborhoods from Regina, Saskatchewan, to Carthage, Mississippi, organize walking tours to discover the attractions and history of their community.

## 13. Aspire to walking marathons or half-marathons

By nature, Americans are full of aspiration, always pushing themselves to do bigger things. So walking, for all its social and health benefits, can seem pedestrian to some people. Certified fitness and walking coach Michele Stanten promotes the idea of walking marathons to give walkers something big to aim and train for. Right now there are only a handful of walking marathons and half-marathons, but walkers are usu-

ally welcome at running marathons (nearly 40 percent of finishers in the Portland Marathon now walk). As America's population ages and more folks discover the pleasures of walking, this is an idea ready to take off.

## 14. Get more information & inspiration

To learn more about the value of walking, see the free online movie The Walking Revolution, and enjoy the recent reunion of The West Wing cast in a 2-minute sketch extolling the benefits of walking.

## 15. Join the movement

Americans' growing enthusiasm for walking has sparked a national movement focused on encouraging everyone to walk more, and making our communities more walkable. The second National Walking Summit held in late 2015 drew more than 500 people representing several hundred organizations in 44 states, up more than 25 percent from the first summit in 2013.

Contact [info@AmericaWalks.org](mailto:info@AmericaWalks.org) to learn how to connect with walking advocacy groups in your area.

—JAY WALLJASPER

▼ In early May, people around the world organize cultural tours of their neighborhoods to honor urban champion Jane Jacobs. Here's one in Phoenix.





▲ Some health care systems include physical activity as a vital sign, which they check at each patient's medical visits.

## Many MDs Now Prescribe a Stroll

“What if there was a pill you took one day that lowered your blood pressure, prevented diabetes, improved your mood and protected against depression, increased bone density and prevented fractures, helped you remain independent as an older adult, enhanced your ability to think, and gave you more energy?” ask Dr. Robert Sallis and Dr. Karen J. Coleman in [Sports Medicine Bulletin](#).

“Would you be asking your doctor to prescribe it for you?”

Such a drug already exists, Sallis notes, it's called walking.

Recommended dosage is 30 minutes a day, five days a week, but children should double that to 60 minutes a day. Side effects may include weight loss, improved mood, improved sleep and bowel habits, stronger muscles and bones, as well as looking and feeling better.

Biking, swimming, dancing, gardening, sports, jogging and aerobics work equally well, Sallis said, but he cites three factors that make walking the most effective treatment: (1) low or no cost; (2) simple to do for people of all ages, incomes and fitness levels; and (3) walking is Americans' [favorite physical activity](#), so we are more likely to stick with a walking program than with other fitness prescriptions.

Sallis, a family practitioner at a Kaiser Permanente clinic in Fontana, California, keeps special walking RX prescription pads in his exam rooms, which he fills out for patients.

What are patients' reactions? “They respond very well to this message,” Sallis says. “This approach really frames for them how important exercise is to their health and treating their disease.”

A growing number of other healthcare professionals now include physical activity as one of the vital signs—like blood pressure and tobacco use—they check with patients at every appointment. Several healthcare systems now track physical activity



▲ Family practitioner Dr. Bob Sallis recommends walking as a good way to help prevent depression and dementia as well as heart disease and diabetes.

in their healthcare records, including Greenville Health in South Carolina, Intermountain Healthcare in Utah and Idaho, and Kaiser Permanente in eight states and the District of Columbia.

In 2009, physical activity was designated as a vital sign for Kaiser Permanente facilities in Southern California, and the idea was quickly adopted throughout the rest of the nonprofit organization—the nation’s largest integrated healthcare system with 10.2 million members on the West Coast, the Mid-Atlantic region, Colorado, Hawaii, and Georgia.

Patients are asked how many days a week on average they engage in moderate or strenuous physical exercise, like a brisk walk, and for how many minutes? These two simple questions frequently spark conversation about the value of walking (or yoga, Zumba classes, and other physical activity) in treating and preventing disease. In 2013, Kaiser Permanente’s Exercise as a Vital Sign program was honored with an Innovation Award by the National Business Coalition on Health.

“Asking an individual about their daily physical activity helps our providers learn what matters to our patients and prompts our patients to think about healthier habits,” explains Lisa Schilling, vice president for healthcare performance improvement with Kaiser Permanente’s Care Management Institute.

Intermountain Healthcare started treating physical activity as a vital sign in 2013 for its electronic health record used by clinicians. “It’s a way to bring discussion of physical activity into the exam room,” explains Liz Joy, medical director for community health. “Even if it’s just a brief conversation about how important it is to your overall health. I can let patients know it’s as important as blood pressure, and more important than obesity and cholesterol to your overall health.”

“I generally start by talking about walking, because it’s free and everyone knows how to walk,” she adds. “I’ll tell them just start with 10 minutes at a time—and no one has ever told me they can’t do that. Do that three times a day, and you have your 30-minute daily minimum.”

The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) also promotes adding physical activity to the list of vital signs. “This is for all healthcare providers, not just physicians. Nurses can often make a greater impact because they typically spend more time with you,” notes Brenda Chamness, senior director of ACSM strategic health programs.

—JAY WALLJASPER





▲ Dan Burden and Samantha Thomas of Blue Zones help communities large and small flourish.

## Fresh Ideas to Get Us on Our Feet

While the challenges to walking in our communities are very real, a flurry of new ideas, initiatives, strategies and policies instill high hopes for the future.

### Vision Zero

More than 4,500 Americans are killed crossing the street every year—a tragedy with an annual death toll higher than that of 9/11. But there's optimism this can change now that New York and more than a dozen other cities are implementing Vision Zero campaigns to reduce traffic deaths through street improvements, law enforcement and public education. Similar policies in Sweden cut pedestrian deaths in half over the past five years—and reduced overall traffic fatalities by half too.

### Federal action on pedestrian safety

U.S. Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx recently announced an all-out effort to better apply the department's resources to boost bike and pedestrian safety the same as they do auto and airline

safety. One thrust of his Action Plan on Bike and Pedestrian Safety is to promote design changes to streets that discourage speeding and other dangerous driving.

### Safe Routes to School

Half of kids under 14 walked or biked to school in 1969—now it's less than 15 percent. That sad statistic launched Safe Routes to School campaigns all over the country, in which families, schools and community leaders identify and eliminate barriers that block kids from getting to school under their own power. “We’re finding that the best interventions include both infrastructure improvements and programming. You put the sidewalks in but also get parents involved,” explains Margo Pedroso, deputy director of the Safe Routes to School National Partnership. A five-year study of 800 schools in Texas, Florida, Oregon and the District of Columbia found a 43 percent rise in walking and biking by using this strategy.

## Complete Streets

It's a quite simple idea: All streets should offer safe, convenient and comfortable travel for everyone—those on foot, on bike, on transit, in wheelchairs; the young, old or disabled. Twenty-seven states and 625 local communities across the U.S. have adopted [Complete Streets](#) policies in some form.

## Walking is a fundamental human right

Walking has been shown to optimize our health and strengthen our communities, which means everyone should have equal opportunity to do it. But low-income people often find it difficult or dangerous to take a walk in their neighborhoods, which may lack sidewalks and other basic infrastructure. Studies show that pedestrians in poor neighborhoods are up to [four times](#) more likely to be hit by cars. Fear of crime is another factor that

keeps people from walking. “Is everybody welcome to walk?” is a question we need to ask, says Shavon Arline-Bradley, vice president of Strategic Planning & Partnerships for the NAACP.

## Walkable communities for people of all ages

The mark of a great community is whether you'd feel OK about letting your 80-year-old grandmother or 8-year-old son walk to a nearby park or business district, says Gil Penalosa, former park director of Bogota, Colombia, explaining why he founded [8-80 Cities](#). Too many young and old people today live under virtual house arrest, unable to get anywhere on their own because driving is the only way to go. “Most of us are going to outlive our ability to drive by seven to ten years,” notes walkability expert Dan Burden of [Blue Zones](#).

- ▼ Gil Peñalosa—former Parks Commissioner in Bogotá, Colombia—is a global advocate for creating cities that are safe and inviting for people of all ages.





## Health impact assessments

Evidence is piling up that walking improves our health and saves big money in healthcare costs. But how do we make sure these facts are factored into public decisions about how we plan our communities? The World Health Organization has developed a tool for that, says public health and transportation consultant [Mark Fenton](#). The [Health Economic Analysis Tool](#) allows planners and engineers to gauge how an increase in walking or bicycling trips will extend people's lives, and then places a dollar value on that similar to those used to decide whether other transportation safety measures are worth the extra expense.

## Pedestrian advisory councils

Almost all of us walk every day, but too often we are silent about the problems we face, unlike bicyclists and motorists. That's why towns from Flagstaff to Milwaukee to Frederick, Maryland, have created [pedestrian advisory councils](#) to help lawmakers, planners and street engineers do their jobs better.

## Walk Audits

A deceptively simple idea, [walk audits](#) bring citizens and public officials together to assess the safety and convenience of walking in a particular locale. "They can really change how people look at a place," says Dan Burden, who in 1984 organized the first walk audit at a treacherous Florida intersection. (Walk audits will become even more important to help us safely incorporate new technologies such as [driverless cars](#), which could hit the streets as early as the 2020s.)

## Signs of the times

Many people are so unaccustomed to walking, they don't realize how convenient it is. That's why architecture student Matt Tomasulo posted signs in Raleigh, North Carolina, explaining that key destinations were just a few minutes away by foot. The city soon embraced his guerrilla campaign, and official walk wayfinding signs are now found around town. Tomasulo has since launched [Walk \[Your City\]](#) to help other communities show how easy it is to get around on your own two feet.

## Walk With a Doc

Walking exhibits the lowest drop-out rate of any physical activity, which is why Ohio cardiologist David Sabgir started Walk With a Doc—to sponsor events where people can talk about healthy lifestyles with medical professionals while out walking. [Walk With a Doc](#) now operates in 38 states.

—JAY WALLJASPER





▲ The Vision Zero movement offers proven solutions to stop 4500 pedestrian deaths each year.

## Vision Zero: Stopping the Tragedy No One Wants to Think About

More than 4,500 pedestrians are killed by motor vehicles every year on the streets of the U.S.—a national tragedy surpassing any natural or man-made [disasters](#) over the last 100 years.

Another 68,000 walkers on average are injured every year. The victims are disproportionately children, seniors and people of color, according to a [recent report](#) from the Complete Streets Coalition. Meanwhile, more than 700 U.S. bicyclists die in traffic crashes a year, and another 45,000 on average are injured, adding to the body count.

This pedestrian safety crisis is even deadlier internationally. More than 270,000 people are killed while walking every year, according to the [World Health Organization](#).

Unfortunately, pedestrian and bicyclist deaths (and all traffic fatalities) are viewed as an inevitable side effect of modern life. “People accept this as normal, just as a century ago most people accepted that women could not vote,” observes Gil Penalosa, board chair of [8-80 Cities](#), an international organization working to make streets safe for people of all ages.

Yet recent history offers genuine hope for making our streets safer. A generation ago, domestic abuse and drunk driving were seen as sad, unalterable facts of human nature. But vigorous public campaigns to prevent these tragedies have shown remarkable results, offering clear evidence that destructive human behavior can be curbed when we put our minds to it.

U.S. secretary of transportation Anthony Foxx (former mayor of Charlotte), is making pedestrian and bike safety a major mission with his [Action Plan on Bike and Pedestrian Safety](#). “This is the safest time for transportation in history, except for pedestrians and bicyclists,” he said at the 2014 Pro Walk/Pro Bike/Pro Place conference. Bicycling and walking, he added, are “as important as any other form of transportation.”

## Sweden paves the way

Campaigns to reduce pedestrian, bicyclist and motorist deaths to zero are now taking shape around the country. This new safety strategy, called Vision Zero, is modeled on successful efforts in Sweden, where overall traffic deaths have been cut in half since 2000—making Swedish streets the [safest in the world](#), according to the *New York Times*. Pedestrian deaths in the country have also plunged 50 percent since 2009.

Sweden accomplished all this by emphasizing safety over speed in road design, including improved crosswalks, lowered speed limits, pedestrian streets, and narrowed streets, reports [the Economist](#).

Sweden takes a different planning approach than many other countries, where “road users are held responsible for their own safety” according to the website [Vision Zero Initiative](#). Swedish policy by contrast believes that to save lives, roads must anticipate driver, bicyclist and walker errors, “based on the simple fact that we are human and we make mistakes.”

## Streets of New York

In New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio won office in 2013 on the promise of reducing traffic deaths in a city where someone is killed or seriously injured by a motor vehicle every two hours on average.

“The fundamental message of Vision Zero is that death and injury on city streets is not acceptable, and that we will no longer regard serious crashes as inevitable,” he wrote in a letter to New Yorkers.

Vision Zero was enacted in 2014, with bolstered enforcement of laws against speeding, dangerous driving, and failure to yield to pedestrians, as well as lowering speed limits, installing speed cameras, teaching street safety in schools, and reconstructing roads for greater safety. Results could be seen immediately.

“In 2014 we had a historic low for pedestrian fatalities,” declared Paul Steely White, director of the local walking advocacy organization [Transportation Alternatives](#). In 2015, there were further, if less dramatic, declines in both pedestrian deaths and injuries. “If we can do that here in New York, you can do it anywhere,” White says.

The Vision Zero idea is now spreading across the country. Sixteen cities have joined the year-old [Vision Zero Network](#) to promote the idea nationally and learn from each other, including Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Boston, Denver, San Antonio, Fort Lauderdale, and Fremont, California. More communities—from New Orleans to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania—are looking at preparing Vision Zero efforts, says Leah Shahum, director of the new organization.

## Speed kills

The gravest danger to walkers as well as bicyclists and motorists is drivers who drive dangerously. According to data collected by the New York City Department of Transportation from 2008 to 2012, “dangerous driver choices” contribute to pedestrian deaths in 70 percent of cases. “Dangerous pedestrian choices” are responsible in 30 percent of cases, and joint responsibility is assigned in 17 percent of cases.

As the old saying goes, speed kills. Two [landmark studies](#), one from the U.S. and one from the U.K., found that pedestrians are killed:

- ▷ 5 percent of the time when struck by a car traveling 20 mph,
- ▷ 37–45 percent of the time when struck by a car traveling 30 mph,
- ▷ 83–85 percent of the time when struck by a car traveling 40 mph.

In light of these findings, it's scary to realize that traffic on many American roads travels closer to 40 mph than 20 mph. "If we could do one switch to make safer streets, it would be to reduce car speeds to 20 mph," says Portland-based transportation expert Scott Bricker (former director of America Walks), "which would reduce pedestrian fatalities by 90 percent."

This means more than changing speed limits, according to Charlie Zegeer, project manager at the University of North Carolina's authoritative [Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center](#) (PBIC). He says, "Research shows that lowering a speed limit without

other improvements like road design changes or improved police enforcement doesn't work to slow traffic—it's the roadway design that affects the speed."

*From "Vision Zero Looks to Make Streets Safer—For People of All Ages," by Jay Walljasper, for AARP Livable Communities, [aarp.org/livable](http://aarp.org/livable)*

—JAY WALLJASPER





▲ Well-marked crosswalks significantly improve life for people on foot.

# How to Make Streets Safe & Comfortable for All

Over the past 20 years, traffic engineers have created an entire toolkit of well-proven innovations to make walking less dangerous and more pleasant, which are now being used all across the US. “These pedestrian improvements also typically improve motorists’ and bicyclists’ safety,” says Charlie Zegeer, director of the University of North Carolina’s [Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center](#). “It’s a win-win-win. Everyone’s safer.”

## Reduce the number of car lanes on wide streets

Downsizing four-lane streets to two travel lanes with an alternating turn lane in the middle has become a popular trend across the country. When this “road diet” approach was used on a stretch of [Edge-water Boulevard](#) in Orlando, crashes declined by 34 percent, injuries by 68 percent, and property values on the street rose 8–10 percent. Plus, drivers’ travel times actually decreased. All this explains why the Federal Highway Administration designates road diets as “[Proven Safety Countermeasures](#),” which they suggest traffic engineers use to reduce crashes at intersections.

## Reduce the width of car lanes

“Many communities created 12-foot travel lanes for cars simply because it was a recommended standard. Increasingly they’ve realized wide lanes invite speed, and in neighborhoods, retail districts, and near schools, [narrower lanes send a better message to drivers](#),” says walkable communities expert [Mark Fenton](#).

## Reduce the length of crosswalks

A shorter walk across the street is a safer one. Extending the sidewalk out a few feet into the intersection also [improves safety for all road users](#) by making pedestrians more visible and slowing the speed

of turning traffic. A study in Albany, Oregon, found that these curb extensions significantly reduced the number of drivers failing to yield to people walking across the street.

### Make crosswalks more visible

Mark them with bright swaths of paint, brick or, better yet, elevate them to curb level, which has worked everywhere from Boulder, Colorado, to rural Harrisonburg, Virginia.

### Add medians or pedestrian islands in the middle of busy streets

This has been shown to reduce crashes by 46 percent, by providing a refuge for people crossing the street. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) deems this one of its nine “proven safety countermeasures.”

### Give walkers a head start at traffic lights

A three- to seven-second head start allows pedestrians to enter the crosswalk first and be more visible to motorists, resulting in up to 60 percent fewer pedestrian-vehicle collisions, according to the National Association of City Transportation Officials.

▼ One of the high-tech tools that encourage motorists to drive safely.



### Ban right-on-red turns

Drivers, focused on watching out for other cars as they turn, often don't see people crossing the street on green lights.

### Install speed humps, roundabouts & other traffic-calming measures

These are valuable tools for reminding motorists to mind the speed limit and to keep an eye out for people on foot and bikes. A traffic calming project in West Palm Beach, Florida, resulted in safer streets, less crime, increased property values and \$300 million in business investment. Roundabouts (another FHWA safety countermeasure) added to La Jolla Boulevard in San Diego led to more people walking, new businesses, more on-street parking and shorter travel times for motorists.

### Convert one-way streets to two-way

This encourages safer driving and less noise for local residents. Tampa, Dallas, Louisville and San Jose are among the cities changing streets back to two-way.

### Install red light cameras & other safety tools

It's prohibitively expensive to station a police car at every unsafe intersection, but cameras can nab lawbreakers who speed, run red lights or don't yield right-of-way to people walking. More than 550 communities from Sacramento to Charlotte use them. Even a sign flashing motorists' speeds can reduce traffic injuries.

### Stricter enforcement of traffic laws

Killing or injuring people with a car is no less tragic than doing it with a weapon. Seattle won top honors as a Walk Friendly Community in part for their Aggressive Driver Response Team, where neighborhoods work with police to curb dangerous drivers, and the 2012 Vulnerable User Law, which zeroes in on negligent but not criminal traffic errors that injure or kill people walking.

—JAY WALLJASPER



# What Americans Really Think about Walking

Nearly all Americans recognize the benefits of walking, according to a detailed [national survey](#) from the GfK research firm. Yet almost eight in ten admit they don't walk enough. Here are some of the findings from the research, sponsored by the [Kaiser Permanente](#) healthcare system.

## Overwhelming majority of Americans believe walking is good for them

- ▶ **94%:** Good for their health
- ▶ **91%:** Good way to lose weight
- ▶ **89%:** Great way to relax
- ▶ **87%:** Helps reduce anxiety
- ▶ **85%:** Reduces feelings of depression
- ▶ **66%:** Stimulates their thinking

## Wide majority of Americans view walking favorably

- ▶ **72%:** Walking is "cool"
- ▶ **63%:** Disagree that "Walking is more work than fun"

## Clear majority of American want to make their communities more walkable

- ▶ **80%:** Want to design streets to make walking safer (even if it means driving slower)
- ▶ **71%:** Want better enforcement of speed limits (even if it means driving slower)

## Wide majority of Americans realize they should walk more:

- ▶ **79%:** Should walk more
- ▶ **73%:** My children should walk more
- ▶ **58%:** Would walk more if recommended by doctor

## Why Americans don't walk more:

- ▶ **40%:** Few places within walking distance of my home
- ▶ **40%:** My neighborhood is not very walkable
- ▶ **39%:** Don't have time
- ▶ **36%:** Don't have energy
- ▶ **25%:** Lack of sidewalks or speeding traffic
- ▶ **25%:** No one to walk with
- ▶ **13%:** Crime in my neighborhood

—JAY WALLJASPER





▲ A number of high-tech companies are relocating to downtown Austin because young employees want to live and work within walking distance of shops and cafés.

## Why People on Foot Are Good for the Economy

Firms in the tech, information and creative industries are helping blaze the trail toward walkable communities. That's because the coveted young talent they need to stay competitive in fast-changing fields want to work in places a short stroll from cafés, shops, cultural attractions and housing.

This marks an abrupt turnaround from the tech sector's origins in the sprawling office parks of Silicon Valley and Boston's Route 128. Take a look at what's happening in Seattle. While Microsoft's headquarters remain at the enclosed suburban campus it developed during the 1980s, fast-growing Amazon.com is based in South Lake Union, a revitalized industrial zone jumping with street life a short walk from downtown Seattle. Redeveloped by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, the neighborhood

is also headquarters to REI, the Tommy Bahama clothing company and a satellite Microsoft office, with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation headquarters nearby.

The first thing Google did after buying the electronics firm Motorola Mobility was to move its offices out of the auto-centric office parks of Libertyville, Illinois, to the walkable environs of downtown Chicago to attract young software engineers. Other companies that have recently moved from suburban Chicago to the city include Medline, Walgreen's, Gogo, GE Transportation, Hillshire Brands and Motorola Solutions.

"Two things seem to be 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 former race walker who now con-

sults on public health planning and transportation. Employees with more opportunities to walk at work and at home are healthier, he says, meaning lower insurance rates for their firms.

From his vantage point at the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), senior health scientist Thomas Schmid observes, “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 healthcare costs.” One company relocating to Chattanooga, for example, would do so only if a walking and bike trail was extended to their facility.



▲ Business professor and developer Christopher Leinberger charts the real estate boom in walkable neighborhoods.

## Walkable regions boast stronger economies

Metropolitan areas with many walkable neighborhoods tend to do better economically than those with just a few. *Foot Traffic Ahead*, a report from the [George Washington University \(GWU\) Center for Real Estate and Urban Analysis](#), suggests that auto-dominated suburban development has passed its peak. The greatest potential for future real estate growth is Walkable Urban Places (WalkUPs).

“WalkUPs are a crucial component in building and sustaining a thriving urban economy,” says report co-author Chris Leinberger, a real estate developer and GWU business professor. “Cities with more WalkUPs are positioned for success, now and in the future.”

### Among the report’s notable findings are:

- ▷ Urban areas ranking high for WalkUP districts have 49 percent higher GDP per capita than those ranking low.
- ▷ Offices in WalkUP districts rent for a 90 percent premium per square foot over those in more auto-oriented settings.

A previous in-depth analysis of metro Washington, DC showed that every point over 70 on [Walkscore](#) (the website rating the walkability of any address in America) results in increased rent of 90 cents per square foot for commercial property and a rise in home values of \$20 per square foot for residential property, notes Leinberger.

Walking’s growing popularity raises the issue of lower income people being pushed out of walkable neighborhoods. That’s why Leinberger advocates a policy he calls “value latching,” in which some of the profits made from rising property values is channeled into creating or preserving affordable housing in an area.

Counter-intuitively, *Foot Traffic Ahead* shows that moderate income households (80 percent of average median income) spend less on housing and transportation together in high ranking walkable urban metros, plus have more access to jobs.

—JAY WALLJASPER



## America's Best Cities for Walking

Another sign of Americans' growing enthusiasm about walking is the increasing number of well-publicized lists that rank America's best cities for walking.

- ▷ Walkscore—a website that rates walkability across the US—lauds New York City as No. 1, followed by San Francisco, Boston and Philadelphia.
- ▷ Prevention magazine picks Cambridge, Massachusetts, as best, followed by New York City and Jersey City.
- ▷ The US Census Bureau singles out Ithaca, New York, as tops for people walking to work (42 percent!), with Athens, Ohio, and State College, Pennsylvania, following at 36 percent.
- ▷ The George Washington University School of Business rates metropolitan regions for walking, finding Washington DC the best (particularly for its pedestrian-friendly suburbs) followed by New York City, Boston, San Francisco and Chicago.
- ▷ One of the most detailed rankings comes from Walk Friendly Communities, a project highlighting America's most walkable towns on the basis of "safety, mobility, access and comfort" run by the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center at the University of North Carolina. They rank communities on four levels: bronze, silver, gold and platinum. Alone at the top of the list with platinum status is Seattle.



## What we can learn from Seattle

Seattle has been able to overcome major deterrents to walking like steep hills and steady rain through accomplishments such as:

▷ **The Neighborhood Traffic Calming Program**, which installed more than 1,000 traffic circles, plus numerous road diets, and other improvements to help motorists follow speed limits.

▷ **The Aggressive Driver Response Team**, where neighborhoods work with police to curb dangerous drivers.

▷ **The Vulnerable User Law**, which zeroes in on negligent but not criminal traffic errors that injure or kill pedestrians and bicyclists.

▷ Jen Cole, former staffer with the local pedestrian advocacy program *Feet First*, praises the city's use of **red light cameras**, which photographically nab and fine drivers running red lights in school zones, with the proceeds going to fund safety improvements in the area.

▷ Other action contributing to Seattle's good walking environment are **20 mph speed zones** on some residential streets and many **four-way stop signs** in neighborhoods like the International District, both of which are a boost to walkers' sense of security.

—JAY WALLJASPER

▼ Seattle enacted innovative policies to make neighborhoods safer for walkers.





▲ Oklahoma City mayor Mick Cornett sprang into action after his city was named the 2nd fattest in America.



# How America's "Worst Walking City" Turned Things Around

Oklahoma City ranked dead last for walkability in a 2008 study of 500 communities by *Prevention* magazine and the American Podiatric Medical Association, earning the title of "[worst US walking city](#)".

"Bleak" is how Jeff Speck, urban planner and author of *Walkable City*, describes walking in Oklahoma City seven years ago. "Traffic sped too fast ... for pedestrians to feel comfortable on the sidewalks ... oversized traffic lanes encouraged highway speeds," he wrote in *Planning* magazine.

Mick Cornett, the city's Republican mayor since 2004, says, "We had built an incredible quality of life, if you happened to be a car. But if you were a person, you were seemingly combating the car all day."

Then, a year after the walk rankings, the city again found itself in the harsh glare of unflattering media attention. This time *Men's Fitness* magazine stigmatized Oklahoma City as the "[#2 fattest city](#)" in America. Among the country's 100 largest cities, only Miami was more corpulent.

But that's all changing now. Voters approved an ambitious \$18-million sidewalk improvement fund as part of an initiative that also included money for parks, transit, bike trails and senior wellness centers around town. Four busy streets heading into downtown are now being narrowed, with bike lanes and new "smart intersections" that provide walkers more safety with "refuge island" medians in the middle of streets and clearly marked crosswalks.

So what's driving all this pedestrian progress?

Mayor Cornett, a former sportscaster, bristled at his city being called fat and sedentary. Yet he knew that he couldn't credibly deny these charges since he'd gained enough extra pounds while in office to be labeled obese, thanks to endless rounds of breakfast and lunch meetings.

Cornett launched an initiative to get the city back in shape. Over the past seven years, he notes, Oklahoma City has added hundreds of miles of new sidewalks, built eight miles of bike lanes on the streets (there were none in 2008), added 100 more miles to

the recreational trail network and built new gyms at many public schools. Low-income neighborhoods, where health and obesity issues are most severe, are the biggest focus of the city's programs for active living and healthy eating.

This all seems to be making a difference—the growth in Oklahoma City's obesity rate has slowed significantly from six percent annually to one percent, with the stage set for reductions in the future.

Cornett views this spending as crucial for the city's future. "Young millennials, who want to bike and walk, are arriving in numbers we've never seen before," he says. "We are creating a city where your kids and grandkids will choose to stay."

"It turned out that one thing people—especially young people—wanted was better sidewalks," Cornett explains. That's why the city now builds new sidewalks as part of most repaving projects and kicks in half the cost for any homeowner or neighborhood that wants them. Developers are now required to provide sidewalks in all new projects.

The city is in the early stages of initiating a Safe Routes to School program, making it possible for more school kids to walk or bike, and a Vision Zero campaign, aimed at eliminating all traffic fatalities in the city, says Dennis Blind of the city's planning department. The city also holds Open Streets events—festivals where a street is blocked off to vehicles so people of all ages can reclaim the streets (temporarily) as public space.

The epicenter of walking in Oklahoma City is downtown and nearby neighborhoods, which exhibit all the signs of urban vitality: sidewalk cafés, new loft apartments, refurbished old neighborhoods with local business districts, indie shops and restaurants, nightlife, sports and entertainment venues, well-populated parks, riverside bike trails, and sidewalks alive with people of all ages walking between these spots. The next step is expanding the walkable zone to neighborhoods farther from downtown.

—JAY WALLJASPER





## CASE STUDY : SAINT PAUL, MN



▲ A Haitian dance company helps the street come alive in St. Paul's Rondo neighborhood.

## Friendly Streets Promote Social Equity & Just Plain Fun

Laughter, lively music and lip-smacking appreciation of food from many cultures animates St. Anthony Avenue in St. Paul as a diverse crowd whoops it up at a springtime street festival. Welcome to the Better Bridges Bash.

Chilly temperatures and gusty winds can't dampen folks' enthusiasm—nor does the unpromising location right next to the roaring traffic on Interstate 94. Indeed that's the point of the event: to better con-

nect neighborhoods on either side of the freeway by improving the bridges, and to explore ways to make the area more friendly to people when they are not in cars.

This is why—in addition to enjoying the kazoo parade, a Liberian-American rapper and the Lexington-Hamline Community Band playing selections from Puccini and Dave Brubeck—festival-goers wander into tents where they are encouraged to think expansively about their neighborhood's future.

“We’re seeing that this community is engaged in how the streets feel, and they are letting local leaders know what they want,” offers Isaak Rooble, who is standing next to a gallery of photos showing possible improvement projects for this mixed-income, mixed-race community. People stick green post-its to ones they like; pink ones to those they don’t; and yellow for maybe.

Among the photos generating excitement are:

- ▶ A land bridge covering a section of the freeway with green space;
- ▶ Archways, mosaics and murals at entrances to bridges over the freeway;
- ▶ Medians in the middle of busy intersections making it easier for people to cross the street;
- ▶ Lighting the bridges in a rainbow of colors.

At another tent, people are invited to share their own brainstorm for the neighborhood on an Idea Tree:

- ▶ “less cars”
- ▶ “fountains”
- ▶ “walking path and track”
- ▶ “roller skating rink”
- ▶ “traffic calming”
- ▶ “swings”

- ▶ “no turns on red lights”
- ▶ “more street parties”

“I am passionate about community development and helping migrants get involved with the community,” says Isaak Rooble, a young Somali immigrant working with [Friendly Streets Initiative](#) (FSI), the organization hosting the event.

FSI is conducting surveys with as many festival-goers as possible in English, Somali, and Oromo (a language spoken in parts of Ethiopia and Kenya) to learn more about issues in the neighborhoods surrounding the freeway. This is part of the organization’s “community-led mission,” which means “We are guided by the ideas coming out of neighborhoods,” explains Robyn Hendrix, a community organizer with the group.

## Saint Paul

Walkscore

**56**

Walk to work

**3.1%**

Population density  
per square mile

**3,425**

Non-white population

**30.1%**

Median household  
income

**\$55,460**

Households below  
poverty level

**11.8%**

▼ Isaak Rooble (standing) surveys local residents about what they want to see in their neighborhood.





## On the streets where we live

The Friendly Streets Initiative grew out of a group of volunteers working with various neighborhood organizations to make biking and walking safer. In the summer of 2011, they sponsored a series of five block parties along Charles Avenue a few blocks north of the bridge to discuss community concerns. The group created a survey to measure residents' opinions and offered a photo gallery of innovative street designs found around the world.

Closing off a block to traffic from 3 to 7 p.m. on Fridays, the parties featured food from local restaurants, games, and the opportunity for neighbors to get to know each other better. "More than 700 people turned out and we got a real sense of what the community thought," recalls Lars Christiansen, a sociologist at Augsburg College. "What they liked and what they didn't."

The ideas neighbors liked most became the nucleus of the Charles Avenue Friendly Street plan, which emphasized four street improvements:

1. Better-marked crosswalks at busy intersections;
2. Traffic circles, which help slow the speed of vehicles at low-volume intersections;
3. Medians and other modifications at busy intersections, which provide refuge for pedestrians and bicyclists crossing the street;
4. A raised intersection, and sidewalks bumping out into the streets at select locations.

The volunteer committee formally organized themselves as the Friendly Streets Initiative to build support for the Charles Avenue project among neighbors and on the city council. Construction on Charles Avenue began in 2014 along a four-mile stretch of the street running through racially and economically mixed neighborhoods.

"FSI built grassroots support for change in St. Paul, a city reputed to have lots of opposition to bike and walk projects," observes Jessica Treat, director of Transit for Livable Communities.

▼ Friendly Streets Initiative staffers Lars Christiansen (left) and Darius Gray relax in a parklet the group constructed.





Rates of walking and biking in St. Paul are lower than in the neighboring city of Minneapolis, and fewer high-profile bicycle and pedestrian facilities have been built so far. Treat credits FSI with mobilizing young families and other groups in the city who don't usually weigh in on planning decisions, which showed political leaders the depth of public support for walk and bike projects.

Council Member Russ Stark, whose ward contains a section of the project, notes that FSI has changed how business is done in St. Paul. "By talking to people where they live, by using block parties and other means to find out what people value on their streets, they've helped change how we do civic engagement. We usually hear from a vocal minority on projects, but we don't necessarily know what the public as a whole thinks."

"We created a movement in the neighborhood by organizing around this project," Christiansen says, still sounding surprised five years later.

### All over town

Begun as a project to improve one street, FSI now works all over town. "We thought people could learn from our experience in community visioning to help them think differently about their streets," explains Christiansen, who became FSI director in 2013.

Their first step off Charles Avenue was Pelham Boulevard. "People were always harping about the speed of the traffic [on Pelham], so we lined up FSI for a project," says Drew Ross, who was the president of the local neighborhood association.

They adopted a similar approach as for Charles Avenue—a series of parties along the street where folks come out for fun as well as the chance to share their thoughts about the neighborhood. "We put the free ice cream right next to where people could take the survey to entice them," Ross remembers. "We got a tremendous response. What we found was that 100 percent of neighbors said Pelham has a problem—it's hard to cross because drivers speed and roll through the stop signs all day."

"Now we're going to get a transformed Pelham out of this," he enthuses.

Plans for the street call for adding protected bike lanes to Pelham, which will reduce speeding by narrowing the street lanes for cars and also provide a buffer zone between walkers and traffic. "What's good for biking is usually good for walking too," explains Christiansen, based on his survey of academic research.

"FSI got a conversation started, and that's been great for us," Ross remarks. "They really sparked the imagination of local residents and empowered us to find solutions."

He adds that one of FSI's hidden strengths is to create demonstration projects showing residents, business owners and city officials how new ideas actually work: protected bike lanes, parklets, creative lighting, traffic calming infrastructure, artist-designed benches and more.

One idea generating broad enthusiasm in St. Paul is parklets, a booming trend in San Francisco and New York where on-street parking spaces are transformed into public space, either temporarily or permanently. FSI worked with the Aurora St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation to create a parklet on University Avenue, which will become permanent this year, according to the group's director Nieeta Presley. "It turned out marvelous as a gathering place—seniors were there, kids would come there and just chill."

### Rondo Lives!

"Aurora St. Anthony is what's left of Rondo," says Presley, referring to the African American Rondo neighborhood where photographer Gordon Parks and civil rights leader Roy Wilkins grew up, much of which was bulldozed in the 1960s to construct the I-94 freeway.

"It was a beloved community," says Melvin Giles, FSI community organizer, who remembers Rondo as a young child. "People would walk to the neighborhood store and kids could see all the other kids. They'd play baseball and football in the street. You couldn't do those things today."



▲ Marvin Anderson leads the effort to restore a neighborhood devastated by the construction of a freeway.

What was once Rondo is probably the worst place in St. Paul to walk today, with a freeway ripping through the middle of the area and bridges that feel dangerous and dispiriting to cross.

“They seemed not to care a lot about poor kids and African American kids getting to school, or anywhere else, when they built the freeway,” remarks Anne Parker, an artist working with FSI who has lived in the neighborhood for 26 years.

Last summer a group of government, transportation and community leaders toured the bridges on foot as part of a workshop FSI sponsored with the St. Paul Riverfront Corporation. The group noticed right away that crossing Lexington Avenue on the north side of the bridge is a daunting process that can involve waiting at three stoplights and crossing eight lanes of traffic, much of it turning in front of you. Seeing someone negotiating the street in a wheelchair caused several people in the group to shudder.

Conditions are equally grim on many of St. Paul’s other I-94 bridges. Many walkers endure sidewalks so narrow that they must scrunch together to walk side-by-side, and switch to single-file if any other walker needs to pass.



▲ Friendly Streets organizer Robyn Hendrix uses art projects to help people imagine what’s possible for their neighborhoods.

“We heard over and over that the bridges are a real issue,” says Christiansen, explaining how FSI’s Better Bridges project was born.

### Better bridges make better communities

A circle of drummers keep the beat on a mild February day in Rondo Plaza, a pocket park which commemorates St. Paul’s African American legacy. Kids wander a labyrinth course in the melting snow, designed by a local artist, while adults gobble Somali appetizers from the nearby Flamingo restaurant.

Welcome to Wintermission, another in a continuing series of Better Bridges events, this one held at the foot of the Victoria Avenue Bridge co-sponsored by FSI and 880 Cities, an international organization working to promote safe streets for people of all ages.

“A lot of outside groups who want to help the neighborhood just come in and start doing stuff—FSI did not do that,” says Melvin Giles, explaining why he joined the group. “As an organization we help the community decide what it wants by offering a process for people to think about what they want from their streets—and then we will work with them.”



▲ Community organizer Melvin Giles greets neighbors at a winter festival.

Giles helped convene a series of listening sessions with elders and leaders in the African American community. “FSI is not doing things for us; it’s doing things *with* us,” he says. “It’s not just community engagement. FSI shows you how to turn your ideas into reality.”

One of the community leaders Giles contacted is Marvin Roger Anderson, a retired attorney and Minnesota State law librarian. “Encouraging bicycling and walking are important to reweaving the Rondo neighborhood, so I am delighted to be working with Friendly Streets,” Anderson says. “Biking and walking are healthy. Biking and walking can save you money. We need to create a culture of biking and walking.”

Anderson, 76, underscores the importance of making St. Paul comfortable for older walkers. “It’s not just cars and crime you have to be careful about, but also bikes. We need to separate the cars, the bikes and the pedestrians, especially on the bridges, like they do on Copenhagen’s streets.”

The Better Bridges project has been designed around two goals:



▲ Drew Ross helped lead a successful campaign to slow traffic on a street near his home.

*Long-term:* Call on the community’s expertise and creativity to inspire fresh thinking about transforming these bridges into connections between neighborhoods rather than barriers. Planned reconstruction of the freeway offers opportunities for big ideas, like land bridges, which would create new parks and public spaces for the community. “We want to collect ideas now so that when it comes time to remodel the bridge we don’t just get a cookie-cutter approach,” says longtime neighborhood activist Patricia Ohmans.

*Short-term:* Tap that same expertise and creativity for ideas on improving existing bridges. The Pelham Boulevard Bridge is already getting protected bike lanes, for instance, and a green common space will sprout on an empty lot near the Snelling Avenue Bridge, which right now feels more like a suburban interchange than a city street.

“The whole point of FSI is to transform streets of fear into streets of joy, in ways both large and small, affecting the physical environment and the emotional one,” says Christiansen.



# What we can learn from St. Paul

## Rethink community engagement

It's no longer good enough to simply present neighborhood people with a plan, and ask them to approve it. Residents are the world's leading authorities on what their communities need. They must be involved in the planning of a project from the very start. Their ideas and goals must be given serious consideration every step of the way.

## Demonstrate how new ideas work

Installing temporary prototypes of proposed improvements lets everyone get a feel for how well they work. It can dispel unwarranted fears and reveal potential problems.

## Recognize how things are connected

Social, economic, cultural and psychological issues are all linked. A better sidewalk or walking trail can boost economic opportunity, racial inclusion and community aspirations as well as transportation. When you understand all that is at play with a given project, you'll get more successful outcomes for everyone.

## Take art seriously

Art is not a frill—it's indispensable in helping everyone reimagine their communities, and discovering new approaches to old problems. "Asking people to draw or paint or act out what they would like to see in their neighborhood allows everyone to think differently and find new inspiration," notes Robyn Hendrix, arts organizer for the Friendly Streets Initiative (FSI) from 2014 to 2016. "The arts activities brought kids and families out, and created a festival quality that also drew more low-income people and people of color," adds FSI director Lars Christiansen.

## Tap the power of partnership

In its short history, FSI has partnered with a long list of other groups ranging from the City of St. Paul to the St. Paul Riverfront Corporation to neighbor-

hood organizations to foundations to youth groups to arts groups to higher education groups to private businesses to out-of-town organizations like Dallas-based The Better Block and Toronto-based 880 Cities.

## Seek financial help

FSI is able to undertake ambitious projects thanks to a variety of funders, including the Central Corridor Funders' Collaborative, the Knight Foundation, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota and the federal Non-Motorized Pilot Project.

## Work with the community

Find out who are the leaders, which may not be who you expect. Learn about neighborhood concerns. Speak their language (literally and figuratively). Listen.

## Be flexible

No community visioning method is universal. What works in one place may flounder just a few blocks away. Discover the tools the community itself uses.

## Make it fun

"A feeling of festivity, levity and wonder enliven the conversations about public spaces," concludes Christiansen. "You need a sense of play in everything you do." FSI events have included mini-golf, living statues, chalk drawing, flagmaking and lots of music and food.

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—JAY WALLJASPER



## CASE STUDY : ARLINGTON, VA



▲ Arlington bounced back from decline by attracting young residents with bustling streetlife and good transit.

## America's Most Walkable Suburb

Suburban life has always been synonymous with long hours in the car—going to work, school, shopping, and to see friends. Some people even drive to take a walk.

That's changing now, just like the stereotype of suburbs as places where everyone is white, married with children, and plays golf at the country club. Citizens coast-to-coast are reinventing suburban communities. Traffic is being tamed on busy streets. New sidewalks and trails are being constructed. Business districts are coming to life thanks to growing foot traffic.

Leading the charge are suburban leaders who see their towns' continuing prosperity and quality-of-life dependent on creating lively walkable places that attract young people, families and businesses wanting to locate where the action is.

The best place to experience the future of suburban living is Arlington, Virginia, right across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. Built up around World War II after autos already dominated American life, it's a classic suburb full of freestanding homes with driveways and green lawns. Nonetheless, it's been named one of the 25 Best Cities for Walking by *Prevention* magazine and one of the 16

## Arlington

Walkscore

**67**

Walk to work

**5.1%**

Population density  
per square mile

**8,476**

Non-white population

**28.2%**

Median household income

**\$105,120**

Households below  
poverty level

**6.5%**

top “Walk Friendly” communities in America by the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center at the University of North Carolina.

Young people are flocking to Arlington because it offers a broad choice of transportation options beyond the car: foot, bike, bus, Metro trains, car-share and bikeshare. It is one of only two communities in the entire Washington region that saw their median-age drop between 2000 and 2010 (the other was D.C. itself), says Arlington’s director of transportation Dennis Leach.

“We have one of the highest concentrations of millennials in the country because they are more wedded to their iPhones than to vehicles.”

### Daily life in the suburb of tomorrow

Even on an unseasonably frigid Friday evening you’ll find folks walking their dogs, pushing baby strollers, toting home groceries or just out strolling in Arlington’s Courthouse/Clarendon neighborhood. One young man clutches a bouquet of flowers as he hurries down the street. Sidewalk traffic is brisk with people heading from office buildings, transit stops, parking lots, and nearby residences to health clubs, shops, restaurants and movie theaters.

The next morning is blustery with snow flurries, but the wide sidewalks of Arlington’s Virginia Square/Ballston neighborhood are bustling with people running errands at the bank, the cleaners, the mall, the tailors, the pharmacy and the phone store before stopping off at the hair salon, Starbuck’s, or one of several sandwich shops. A lot of folks popped over from the nearby apartment buildings and townhomes that have grown up recently in what once was a struggling commercial strip, while others hoofed

it from nearby single family homes. Walking a couple of blocks in any direction from this town center, you’re transported from the bustling urbane milieu of TV shows like *How I Met Your Mother* to the leafy bucolic setting of *The Brady Bunch*.

Clarendon/Courthouse and Ballston/Virginia Square are both served by the D.C. region’s Metro train system, a boost for walkable communities that most American suburbs won’t have access to anytime soon. But pedestrians flourish in Arlington neighborhoods that are distant from train lines too.

The newly built Shirlington community, rising out of the ashes of a failed shopping center, feels like a suburban village. A main street built in what was once a parking lot invites you to enjoy a wide selection of shops, ethnic restaurants, a library, a theater company and a brewpub. Around the corner stand a full-service grocery and popular bookshop. A few steps away are movie theaters, hair salons, yoga studios, office buildings, townhomes, apartments, a bus station and parking garages.

### Arlington’s path to transformation

Arlington did not become a pedestrian success story overnight. The sidewalks are lively today thanks to a series of smart decisions carried out over several decades.

As an early model for the auto-oriented development that spread across the country after World War II, Arlington also became one of the first suburbs to experience the inevitable symptoms of aging. The population dropped from 174,000 in 1970 to 152,500 in 1980 as new land to develop became scarce and young people moved away.

“This was a declining inner ring suburb,” notes Chris Zimmerman, who served on the county board for 18 years. (Arlington is both a city and a county.) “I moved here as a college student in 1979 because of the cheap rent. Arlington was a stopover for a lot of people until they could afford to move somewhere else.” It’s a familiar story today in many struggling suburban communities.



“I walked in those days because I didn’t have a car, but I saw very few other people walking,” remembers Zimmerman, who left the county board in 2013 to become vice president of economic development for Smart Growth America, which promotes walking as part of its mission to create healthy, economically vital communities.

The first step in Arlington’s revival was improved transit service, including a number of stops on the Washington Metro subway system. That reversed the population decline, as new apartment buildings and shopping rose around the stations. Walking picked up a bit in the immediate vicinity of Metro stops, but not in other parts of town. That’s because most of the streets were still designed to move cars as quickly as possible with little regard for the impact on pedestrians and surrounding neighborhoods, Zimmerman explains.

In the 1990s the county board, spurred on by neighborhood activists, adopted an “urban village” approach to planning, which allows people to live within walking distance of services they regularly use, from grocery stores and daycare to drugstores and restaurants. “This idea really resonated with people—the idea of comfort and community while still being cosmopolitan,” says Zimmerman.

One major focus of this plan was to make walking more safe and convenient. Sidewalks were improved while the pedestrian-crossing distances at intersections were narrowed. The outdated policy of charging homeowners for the cost of building new sidewalks—still common throughout the U.S.—was eliminated. “Homeowners are not expected to pay for the street in front of their house; why should they be responsible for the pedestrian infrastructure?” Zimmerman declares in a case study about Arlington done by America Walks.

Ninety percent of Arlington’s residential streets now have sidewalks (up from 73 percent in 1997). Walking and biking now account for 16.6 percent of all trips around town.

“When I moved here in the 1990s, I would walk to the grocery store or go running, and if you ever saw anyone else you always said ‘hi’ because there were so few people on the streets,” remembers Lauren Hassel, outreach and promotions manager for WalkArlington. “Now if you stopped to say ‘hi’ to everyone you met on the sidewalk, it would take hours to get where you’re going.”



▲ Lauren Hassel (right) and Teresa Westfall of WalkArlington offer practical advice for people who want to drive less through the city’s WalkArlington program.

The city population is now 222,000 and it is attracting young professionals and families who could afford to live in wealthier suburbs but prefer Arlington’s walkability and sense of community.

Peter Owen, a lawyer who grew up in nearby McLean, Virginia, chose to live in Arlington after college to be close to his family but still enjoy opportunities to walk.

When asked why walking is so important to him, Owen has plenty to say: “I value the serendipitous encounters with my neighbors and the sense of connection to this place. You notice lots more things, like kids playing, when you’re living at five miles per hour.”

“Arlington is becoming a place where people matter more than cars,” he adds. “It’s not just possible to walk here, it’s safe and comfortable to walk. There are crosswalks on the corners and shop windows to look at as you pass by—it’s more fun to walk with those kinds of things.”

“It’s dramatically different walking here than in the 1990s,” says Leach, who got involved at that time on the citizen’s Pedestrian Advisory Committee and was later appointed to the county’s Transportation Commission before joining the county staff in 2004. Leach calculates that over 300,000 walking and bike trips are made by residents, workers and visitors every workday.

## What we can learn from Arlington

### Adopt pro-walk policies

Among the key actions that Arlington has taken over the past 20 years to make streets more accommodating to people on foot are:

▶ **Pro-pedestrian zoning**, which enhances the walking experience by requiring first-floor retail shops or windows on buildings along pedestrian routes and by allowing sidewalk cafés but making sure they don't crowd out people on foot.

▶ **Transportation Demand Management**, a sophisticated strategic approach that looks at the traffic issues involved in all development decisions, and offers incentives for businesses to locate in walkable places served by transit.

### Offer support to people wanting to walk

Nearly everyone I spoke with pointed to the work of WalkArlington, a county-sponsored initiative to encourage people to get back on their feet. "We help make people aware of what great opportunities for walking we already have here," says the organization's outreach and promotions manager Lauren Hassel. The group developed 25 walking routes known as Walkabouts highlighting neighborhoods' history, community resources and attractions. They also publish a calendar of events and a monthly e-newsletter covering walking related topics. It is part of the county's Car-Free Diet program, an innovative approach that helps households figure out how living without a car or car-light (using just one private car) would work for them.

### Launch a Safe Routes to Schools program

Arlington's 22 elementary schools and five middle schools all feature Safe Routes to Schools programs, which devise ways for more children to walk and bike to school.



▲ Chris Zimmerman helped turn Arlington into a community of urban villages.

▼ County Transportation Director Dennis Leach started out as a neighborhood activist.



### Start wherever you can

"You just start somewhere," advises Arlington transportation director Dennis Leach. "You create pockets of walkability between people's homes and centers of community activity like schools, churches, gyms, bus stops, and retail services. The more people you have walking, the more comfortable it is for others to walk."

### Be patient

You won't win success overnight—walkability is a long-distance race. "It takes stamina," Leach says. "You don't fix everything in six months." "You'll have setbacks," former county board member Chris Zimmerman concurs. "Things will stop sometimes."

### Engage the community

Indeed, the most important element of creating a walkable town takes a lot of time. "People need to see the plan as their own and be involved from the very start," Zimmerman emphasizes. "They know a lot and will make the project better. Get the word *NIMBY* out of your vocabulary."

### Pay attention to aesthetics

"You want to make sure the pedestrian environment is attractive to people," adds Leach. "Don't put cars between sidewalks and the buildings, make sure the area around sidewalks and transit stops is not ugly."

[See a recent video about Arlington's success in creating neighborhoods for people of all ages.](#)

—JAY WALLJASPER



## CASE STUDY : PHOENIX, AZ



▲ FitPHX, founded in 2013, sponsors events where people stroll through Phoenix to see what the city offers.

# Sunbelt City Aims to Be America's Healthiest Place

Situated in the Valley of the Sun, Phoenix doesn't face the same challenges as its neighbors to the north in encouraging people to walk. For most of the year, the sunshine and warm weather provide a prime environment to put on your favorite pair of shoes and take a stroll. In addition to its climate, Phoenix is blessed with a terrain made for outdoor activity. The city is home to over 180 parks and 200 miles of desert trails. Open space is readily accessible for many of its residents.

Of course, climate and physical terrain are only part of the equation to help people stay physically active. The City of Phoenix takes advantage of its other as-

sets with creative programming that encourages people to get outside, get together, and get walking. The FitPHX program, launched in 2013 by Mayor Greg Stanton and Councilman Daniel Valenzuela's office, is an initiative aimed at improving the health and wellness of Phoenix and surrounding areas. One of its first focus areas is walking, which is funded in part with grants from Coca-Cola of Arizona and other community partners.

Good planning also plays an important role in supporting and encouraging people to walk in Phoenix. A Complete Streets ordinance was approved in 2014, designed to foster walkable streets and sidewalks.



## Phoenix

Walkscore

**67**

Walk to work

**5.1%**

Population density  
per square mile

**8,476**

Non-white population

**28.2%**

Median household income

**\$105,120**

Households below  
poverty level

**6.5%**

Several street upgrades have already been completed including widening sidewalks, increasing shaded areas (crucial in a city where temperatures can hit 110F) and upgrading pedestrian corridors. In 2015, citizens voted for the first time to include health as a key concept of the Phoenix General Plan. These actions are important signs of the support that walking as a community activity receives from local citizens and government, an important step toward fulfilling Phoenix's goal of becoming one of the healthiest cities in the nation.

### Make walking easy, fun & accessible

One of the tenets of FitPHX is promoting walking throughout every neighborhood in the city. That's why WalkPHX sites and other walking programs, which can be found in each of the city's eight city council districts, are low-cost and friendly for people of all ages and abilities.

FitPHX's Meet Me Downtown partnership pairs the fun of taking a stroll with the chance to build community and strengthen relationships. Each week the city hosts a free noncompetitive 5K walk/run that highlights the best of Phoenix, winding its way past downtown landmarks, exploring parks, and introducing people to local businesses. Since its launch in November 2014, over 13,000 people have logged more than 40,000 miles. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona is the title sponsor, and partner organizations help operate the event.

WalkPHX walking programs, started just this year, work to make the most of Phoenix's green space. The program hosts four weekly group walks led by

park staff, which are designed to get people of all skill levels into parks and on trails. WalkPHX has also created walking loops and wayfinding signage at 24 other parks to get people out.

### How Phoenix envisions fitness

Daniel Valenzuela knows Phoenix as well as almost anyone. He's spent considerable time exploring its parks and trails, and as a firefighter in the region and Phoenix City Council member, he's devoted much of his life to protecting and improving the safety and health of the community.

That's why Valenzuela approached the mayor with his idea to make Phoenix one of the healthiest cities in the U.S. "As a firefighter, I have always been involved with prevention," he explains. "When you see lights and sirens, the emergency has already happened. What can we do to help prevent the emergency in the first place?"

He pointed to the city's resources in terms of physical environment and climate when he proposed the first steps to create the city program now known as FitPHX. Thanks to his leadership, the city took note of over 300 existing programs to foster healthier, safer lives that weren't being highlighted. This provided the starting point for FitPHX.

In an era when many politicians regularly remind us not to expect too much, Valenzuela declares, "There is nothing preventing us from being the healthiest Phoenix today."

Valenzuela says FitPHX's impact on the city is there for everyone to see. Families, friends, and neighbors of all ages are now walking together exploring the city. Partnerships are flourishing between government, local businesses, and nonprofit groups.

### The family that walks together, talks together

Kohl's Fit Kids at Phoenix Children's Hospital was approached by FitPHX to adopt walking routes in parks as part of the hospital's work to prevent obesi-

ty and encourage families to become more physically active. The hospital took the idea one step further, adding geocaching (a high-tech treasure hunt) to the trails and paths they adopted.

Kohl's Fit Kids at Phoenix Children's Hospital and FitPHX are a great fit. The hospital already had programs in place at elementary schools, establishing clubs to promote physical activity for families and offer other resources to help to prevent obesity. Although the hospital had never worked on parks and trails, FitPHX had a lot of the wayfinding and trail maintenance in place, which helped get the new program off the ground quickly.

The partnership allowed Kohl's Fit Kids at Phoenix Children's Hospital to expand their own programs and continue their work in nurturing healthy kids, healthy families and healthy communities. Programs that frame physical activity as a way to spend time as a family are hugely successful, and this one broadened the focus by encouraging extended families to spend time together exploring nature and the community. The added component of Kohl's FIT GEO tour allowed kids to develop critical thinking and mapping skills, and introduced them to electronic resources.

The program is now approaching its third year. The number of participants has grown and the hospital has adopted other parks and trails. It also revised the geocaching materials to be bilingual and available in all reading levels. The hospital plans to continue growing the program, tracking its success through information provided through the geocaching systems employed.



## What we can learn from Phoenix

The success of FitPHX, WalkPHX and other city initiatives (in a place where people can use “the heat” as an excuse not to walk the same way people in northern cities use “the cold”) provides key lessons for other communities, no matter what the weather. Key components are:

### Help everyone get involved

A common denominator for all the work in Phoenix is that programs are low- or no-cost, accessible throughout the city, and do not require previous training or equipment.



▲ City council member and firefighter Daniel Valenzuela helps lead efforts to promote fitness and health.

### Make the most of existing resources

Cities can do more with trails, walking loops and other recreational areas with relatively minor enhancements to maintenance or signage. Encourage park staff or other community leaders to spend time leading walks.

### Bring in local business

With Meet Me Downtown, FitPHX was able to strengthen relationships with local businesses, which provide discounts, raffle prizes and other promotions that attract participants to the 5K events and win new customers in return.

### Get the word out

Cities have more avenues than they might realize to promote walking programs and events. In addition to websites, social media and local newspapers, be sure to publicize via bulletin boards, school announcements and other organizations' informational outlets.

### Keep it manageable

Large yearly events are great, but can be expensive and difficult to control in terms of crowds and traffic. Regularly scheduled walking events become part of people's routines, and can have a significant long-term impact on health.

### Explore partnerships

Reach out to businesses, organizations and other groups who can help provide funding or other resources.

—HEIDI SIMON





## CASE STUDY : **NORTHEAST IOWA**



▲ A walking school bus gets kids to classes in Riceville, Iowa.

# Small Towns Embrace Walking as a Way of Life

The prevalence of walking in rural regions is often overlooked, even by many ardent advocates of physical activity. The distances to work, school, shopping, church and social engagements just seem too far to travel on foot.

Actually, about 7 percent of all trips in rural areas are made by walking, according to census data, compared with a national average of 10 percent. And nine out of ten rural people want to see their communities become more walk-friendly, according to

a recent survey from the Safe Routes to Schools National Partnership, and 81 percent want to increase or maintain current public spending on sidewalks and bikeways.

A visit to northeast Iowa, where farms cover a hilly landscape sprinkled with small towns, offers a new perspective on what's possible in the countryside. The Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative works on walking projects in communities over a six-county area.

## Decorah

Walkscore

**59**

Walk to work

**36.9%**

Population density  
per square mile

**1,149**

Non-white population

**3.7%**

Median household income

**\$50,361**

Households below  
poverty level

**8.6%**

## Decorah

Decorah (pop. 8,000) built the Trout Run Trail, an 11-mile multi-use trail looping through town, a river gorge, hayfields, prairie and dairy farms. Even on a weekday morning, the trail is busy. When a 70-something bicyclist speeds past descending a steep bluff above the Upper Iowa River, Ann Mansfield, project coordinator for the Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative, says, “He’s out every day on his bike, or on foot.” Farther down the path we see an even older woman hiking at a pretty good clip, even though she’s using an oxygen tank. A young woman on her knees examines a newly sprouted wildflower, probably a student taking a break from classes at Luther College.

More than 1,500 people use the Trout Run Trail on warm weekend days, notes Lindsay Erdman, Decorah’s city engineer, who’s been involved in the town’s efforts to build and repair sidewalks. “It’s fun to work on projects that everyone wants.”

“The trail and walkability is not just about health,” explains Mansfield. “It’s an economic driver too. Places with trails and where kids can walk to school are where people want to live.”

“People retire here because of the quality of life,” she adds. “And a frequent question Luther College officials hear in job interviews is whether a family can live here easily with one car. They want to be able to run errands on foot.”

## Postville

Postville (pop. 2,200), home to one of the world’s largest Kosher meat plants, defies stereotypes of small Midwestern towns as lacking in diversity. At the local elementary school, East African kids in head scarves and Jewish kids in yarmulkes run past on their way to after-school activities, as younger ones eagerly line up for the walking club. Led by Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative AmeriCorps member Elin Amundson, the club meets every Thursday after school.

They start first with a healthy snack and then some free play and 20 minutes of

reading. By then the kids, which can number as many as 20—a majority of them Latino—burn off energy by walking, trotting, prancing, and swooshing through the corridors of the school.

The kids’ enthusiasm is contagious. Yeymin says, “Walking is fun.” Alan adds, “It gives you energy and fire.” Cheyenne says, “It helps your brain think more and learn more.” Miguel says, “It’s happy to walk.” After an hour circumnavigating the school, Samuel, 9, is the leader with 19 laps (over 2½ miles) followed by Charley, 5, with 16 laps and Delia, 6, with 15.

▼ About 20 kids in the walking club cover 1-2 miles through the corridors of Postville Elementary School when classes are done under the direction of Elin Amundson.



## Postville

Walkscore

**57**

Walk to work

**14.6%**

Population density  
per square mile

**1,103**

Non-white population

**10.2%**

Median household income

**\$35,089**

Households below  
poverty level

**26.2%**

## West Union

Walkscore

**70**

Walk to work

**5.7%**

Population density  
per square mile

**951**

Non-white population

**3%**

Median household income

**\$44,100**

Households below  
poverty level

**8.9%**

## West Union

West Union (pop. 2,500), which recently redesigned the downtown square to be more pedestrian friendly, features four “walking school bus” routes, in which parents accompany youngsters on foot to school or daycare.

Jes Wegner carries her 8-month-old daughter, Ella, in a front pack as we walk to and from her daughter Ava’s preschool, a trip of about two miles. Nine kids aged 3 to 8 walk or bike this route on various days with Wegner and another parent volunteering as “drivers.”

## Clermont & Elgin

Clermont (pop. 630) and Elgin (pop. 680) don’t have any schools. Like many other places throughout rural America, kids here go to class at a new building in the middle of farm fields. But that doesn’t mean they can’t walk or bike. The Turkey River Recreational Corridor provides a safe off-road route to Valley Elementary School and Fayette Valley Middle School (1.9 miles from Clermont and 1.2 from Elgin). A walking school bus travels the trail to

“I have my daily exercise by the time I get home,” Wegner reports. “And it’s nice getting out and seeing what’s going on around town.” Four-year-old Ava also enjoys the trip. She knows all the kids on the playground at the elementary school by name, and delights in seeing a cat napping on the seat of a riding lawn mower parked in one front yard. “Look, a songbird,” she calls out later as we round a corner toward home.

Nineteen walking school buses operate in nine towns in Northeast Iowa.

and from Elgin in the spring months, and Clermont operates a biking school bus from September to the first snowfall, which starts up again after the spring melt.

“Actually, the kids love to walk in the snow, even in the rain. But the adults don’t like it,” observes Ashley Christensen, the regional Safe Routes to School organizer.

► Left: Regional Safe Routes to Schools organizer Ashley Christensen.

Right: Ann Mansfield coordinates walking programs across six counties for the Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative.





## What we can learn from Northeast Iowa

### Start early

If present trends continue, one out of three first-graders in Iowa today will develop Type-II diabetes during their lives. “But we have the chance now to get a child on a lifetime of healthy living,” urges Ann Mansfield, who coordinates active living and healthy eating programs across six counties in Northeast Iowa.

### Don’t be daunted by distance

The first step—literally—is to get people walking. “The perception of distance is a big thing in rural communities,” says Safe Routes to School coordinator Ashley Christensen. “People don’t realize how close the school or the store really is until you get them walking and they can see for themselves.

### Practice patience

“It doesn’t happen overnight,” Christensen counsels. “We’ve been at it for five years. It’s really important to concentrate first on relationship building. You can’t be just building things right away.”

### Just do it

But at the same time don’t be paralyzed looking for the perfect project. “Give it a try and just pilot something,” offers Christensen. “If it doesn’t work the first time, you can change it.”

### Make walking work for all kids

Kids who live out in the country can ride the motorized school bus to town, and then be dropped off to join a walking school bus for a 15-minute walk to school before the bell rings.

### Harness the energy of civic groups

Trails of Winneshiek County, a bicycling group, worked with the city, the county, the park board, the county conservation board, and state agencies to raise the funds for Decorah’s Trout Run Trail.

—JAY WALLJASPER



## CASE STUDY : **SAN FRANCISCO, CA**



▲ Chinatown is one of the neighborhoods where residents are joining together to make the streets safer.

# A Vision to End All Traffic Deaths

San Francisco is often near the top on lists of America's most walkable places. The city also ranks high in pedestrian fatalities and injuries. That's why community members and leaders began to seek a solution to this tragic problem. Fortunately, an answer is just steps away.

San Francisco enjoys lively street life, and nurtures a creative culture that through the decades has fostered many cultural and technological breakthroughs. It's also a leader in placemaking innovations to make cities more livable, including parklets (where stretches of on-street parking are transformed into public space) and Sunday Streets (where some streets are closed to traffic on Sundays so people can bike, walk and play). In San Francisco, people routinely walk to school, work or shopping, and for enjoyment.

Unfortunately, people on foot account for 60 percent of all traffic deaths in the city. On a typical day, three people will be hit by cars while walking—a rate four times the national average. Family and friends of victims would often speak out for safety measures to protect people crossing the street. Yet walking advocates at Walk San Francisco (Walk SF) and other groups saw a disturbing pattern: Individual incidents would activate a neighborhood, but there was no unified movement that could demand significant change across the city and at City Hall.

### The streets of San Francisco

Many San Franciscans have found their rallying cry in Vision Zero. After a near-record high of 25 traffic deaths involving people walking and biking in 2013, Walk SF and the San Francisco Bike Coalition

## San Francisco

Walkscore

**74**

Walk to work

**10.3%**

Population density  
per square mile

**17,688**

Non-white population

**50.5%**

Median household income

**\$78,378**

Households below  
poverty level

**7.8%**

joined with other community groups to create the Vision Zero Coalition to urge city leaders to adopt Vision Zero. Inspired by a movement developed in Sweden, where pedestrian deaths were cut in half between 2009 and 2014, Vision Zero is a strategy to eliminate all traffic fatalities and severe injuries by putting safety first in road design and policies.

Walk SF and their collaborators saw success in 2014 when the city adopted a Vision Zero policy to end all traffic deaths and serious injuries by 2024. The plan works on five

fronts: enforcement, education, engineering, evaluation and policy, says Timothy Papandreou, director of innovation for the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency. A major focus is to fix the 12 percent of streets where over 70 percent of all traffic deaths and serious injuries occur, known to the City as “high injury corridors.”

Another focus is stricter enforcement of the five traffic infractions that cause most traffic injuries: running red lights, running stop signs, violating pedestrian right-of-way, turning violations and speeding. The SF Police Department has committed to doubling the tickets issued for these violations to 50 percent of all traffic tickets in 2016.

As the City has moved from policy adoption to implementation, the Vision Zero Coalition has shifted its focus to informing, supporting and watchdogging the City’s implementation of these ambitious goals.

### Chinatown walks

Walk SF and the Vision Zero Coalition cite widespread community support and engagement as a factor in their successful adoption of Vision Zero.

One coalition member organization, the Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC), sees Vision Zero as a core part of their work promoting community engagement and social equity.

CCDC has long worked to ensure that walking remained safe and accessible in their neighborhood as part of their focus on affordable housing, transportation planning and quality of life issues. They also responded to pedestrian injuries after the fact on a case-by-case basis. However, the citywide Vision Zero strategy gave them an opportunity to tackle the important work of preventing traffic crashes from happening in the first place.

CCDC attributes most of their Vision Zero success to their increasing capacity in engaging and educating residents of all generations living in the neighborhood. They teamed up with the Coalition to draw attention to Vision Zero in the local press, ethnic newspapers, neighborhood blogs and websites, which elevated Vision Zero as a safety solution around which people could mobilize.

The organization has led ongoing education efforts offering the community culturally relevant walking resources and programs, including walk audits and advocacy training workshops. CCDC has also adopted a pedestrian safety master plan for the neighborhood, which they are working to get implemented. Their chief focus is on improving safety along high-injury corridors, and they have succeeded in getting a pedestrian scramble (where traffic signals stop all vehicle traffic so people can safely cross the street in every direction) installed at key locations where deadly crashes have already occurred and could have been prevented by allowing people to walk without any vehicle movement.

With one of the lowest car ownership rates in the city, Chinatown has an obvious stake in the adoption of Vision Zero. CCDC’s work with the Vision Zero Coalition is a prime example of a neighborhood organization that leveraged existing resources to improve conditions for its residents while also growing their own organizational capacity as a result of a new partnership.



## Powerful voices for change

A major focus of Vision Zero is empowering crash survivors and family members who have lost loved ones to become advocates, often transforming their devastating experiences into action that inspires injury prevention, and thus sparing others the same fate.

One victim in San Francisco, Jikaiah Stevens, added her voice, her face and her talents as a photographer to the pedestrian safety efforts. Stevens was hit by a driver running a red light in September 2013 while she was walking to work; she suffered traumatic brain injuries as a result. Despite the fact that the driver admitted fault and there were several witnesses on the scene, police refused to issue a citation. This frustrating turn of events motivated Stevens to help remove some of the institutional barriers to improving pedestrian safety in the city.

After leaving the hospital, Stevens used her background in art and photography to create a visual depiction of the life-changing experience she and other victims endure. With her documentary, *Walk*

*at Her Own Risk*, she gave a face to the injustice pedestrians involved in crashes suffer as well as a picture of the huge costs—financial and otherwise—to people, their families and the community at large.

Jikaiah Stevens joined Walk SF and the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition's campaign calling for concrete changes to a system that allows motorists to drive away without consequences. At a January 2014 hearing, San Francisco Chief of Police Greg Suhr committed to issuing citations to those at fault for hitting and injuring people in traffic crashes. Stevens' advocacy directly resulted in changes to a culture where drivers suffer little to no consequences when injuring or killing other people from behind the wheel. She is now making progress in having her documentary used as an education tool for police and the broader community.

Stevens' personal story, combined with many others, prove that while San Francisco is a city filled with walkers, not all streets are designed for them. The system and those whose job it is to make the streets safe need to do more to protect pedestrians

▼ A wide assortment of organizations formed the San Francisco Vision Zero Coalition to take action about the tragic toll of traffic crashes.





◀ After being seriously injured by a motorist, artist Jikiah Stevens (right) made a documentary about her experience which Nicole Ferrara, director of Walk SF, uses to raise awareness.

and bicyclists. Her inspiration in turning tragedy into action has given a voice to all the victims who have been marginalized—and has given added power to the Vision Zero movement.

Despite early success, the work to make San Francisco's streets safe for people who walk is far from over. There are still corridors and intersections that are particularly unsafe and a culture where driving is too often prioritized over other forms of transportation. One of the biggest challenges remaining will not be won in San Francisco, but in the state capital of Sacramento, where advocates continue to fight for changes to state policy that currently limit Vision Zero efforts locally.

Walking advocates also push for progress on other fronts. Too often, crashes that result in pedestrian injuries or fatalities are framed in a way that narrowly blames the individuals involved. Walk SF and others are working hard to make sure that people realize that roads can be engineered to greatly reduce the tragedies that happen when humans make mistakes.

## What we can learn from San Francisco

San Francisco benefited from the existence of established walking advocacy organizations and a growing public concern about pedestrian fatalities. Walk SF and the Vision Zero Coalition make sure that everyone, community members and officials alike, remember that traffic deaths are preventable when streets are designed to be safe. Walking advocates attribute their success to some of the following approaches:

### Bring everyone to the table

Having community support from a wide range of organizations, individuals and city agencies broadens support for projects, and creates a wide sense of ownership on the issue, which helps to increase engagement and commitment.

### Remember, “policy is easy, implementation is hard”

There's no problem finding political support for adopting a policy with safety at its core. However during implementation, trade-offs have to be made and resistance to the change is to be expected. Groups must be prepared for push back across city departments and in communities.

### Keep in mind that timing is key

The tragic increase in fatalities and injuries involving people walking and biking in 2013 attracted everyone's attention to the problem, and Vision Zero was the solution that filled the void, while also helping to turn individual pain and suffering into a proactive, unified movement calling for needed changes.

—HEIDI SIMON





## CASE STUDY : **ALBERT LEA, MN**



▲ The 5-mile Blue Zones Walkway around Fountain Lake Park brings out people all year round.

## Vital Town on the Prairie

It's a scene that would make a great *New Yorker* magazine cover.

A large Latino family strolls leisurely through the park, immersed in conversation. Coming up fast behind is a blonde woman in designer exercise gear, intent on maintaining her power-walking pace. Bringing up the rear is a young man walking on the path with his husky, both of them staring up at a patch of sun that has appeared from behind the clouds.

In real life, this is Fountain Lake Park in Albert Lea, a prairie town of 18,000 in southern Minnesota working to prove that healthy lifestyles like walking and good nutrition are not just big city things. "We're not a resort town or a college town, we're an ag-based rural city promoting healthy living be-

cause it's the right thing to do and it's how we want to live and want our children to live," explains Ellen Kehr, a leader in local efforts to make Albert Lea more walkable.

It's mistakenly assumed that no one in small towns walks, except between their pick-up truck and the Wal-Mart entrance. Actually, walking is far more common in smaller communities than people think. In towns of 10,000–50,000, 8.5 percent of all trips are made on foot, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation's National Household Travel Survey. In smaller towns of 2,500 to 10,000, walking accounts for 7.2 percent of trips—higher than in most suburban communities.



## Albert Lea

Walkscore

**28**

Walk to work

**2.1%**

Population density  
per square mile

**1,424**

Non-white population

**6.3%**

Median household income

**\$37,576**

Households below  
poverty level

**10.9%**

### Where the women are strong...

Albert Lea in many ways resembles Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon (except more diverse—about 6 percent people of color). It aspires to be a place “Where the women are strong ... and all the children are above average.” That fits with the goal local citizens embraced in 2009 when they adopted a communitywide approach to wellness laid out in *Blue Zones*, a best-selling book by *National Geographic* Fellow Dan Buettner examining places around the world where people live longest and healthiest.

What's been accomplished in the last seven years offers lessons and inspiration for small towns and cities across the U.S.

More than one-quarter of adults in Albert Lea have joined exercise and healthy eating programs, along with half of local workplaces and nearly all kids in grades 3–8. Six miles of new sidewalks and three miles of new bike lanes have been added to city streets. The city won a grant to acquire eight miles of railroad right-of-way to expand a local rail trail and is exploring creating another trail to link downtown with Wal-Mart and other businesses near the Interstate. Meanwhile, the downtown center has been transformed into a walk-friendly place, which has the bonus effect of attracting new businesses and customers.

All these improvements are getting local residents back on their feet. Kehr, lead organizer for the Blue Zones Project in Albert Lea, proudly points to hard data showing:

▷ Bike and walking traffic at three busy intersections around town is up 38 percent since 2009, according to counts conducted using methodology developed by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

▷ Pedestrian activity downtown rose 250 percent from 2014 to 2015, after downtown walking improvements were completed, according to the City of Albert Lea.

▷ The number of walkers in Fountain Lake Park has jumped 80 percent since the 5-mile Blue Zones Walkway around the lake opened in 2009.

▷ Albert Lea residents rank 5.7 points above the Minnesota state average for people reporting that they feel physically active and productive in the 2014 Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index. (Minnesota ranks seventh among all states in the Index.)

Kehr is just as proud of some nonscientific evidence of Albert Lea's success that recently landed on her desk. “The mayor dropped off a letter, and asked me to answer it. It was from leaders in Aspen, Colorado, wanting to know more about how to make their town walkable. Aspen wants advice on health from Albert Lea! Who would have expected that?”

Last year Albert Lea was rated #3 of the Top 10 Affordable Small Towns Where You'd Actually Want to Live by Realtor.com, which highlighted the town's Blue Zones goal “to add years to the lives of its inhabitants.”

Smoking has also dropped 4 percent since 2009, and Blue Zones participants collectively lost almost 6 tons of weight. Two-thirds of locally operated restaurants and one large supermarket now offer new options for healthy eating. Residents formed 30 groups to walk or bike together regularly seven years ago, nearly half of which are still going strong.

“The Blue Zones initiative allowed our community to look at ourselves in a different light and build a better future,” declares Mayor Vern Rasmussen Jr.



▲ Pedestrian improvements downtown helped attract 15 businesses in the last two years, with \$2 million in new investment slated for the next year.

City Council member Al Brooks, who now walks 2½ miles every day, credits the campaign with big improvements in his own health. “When I started five years ago, I had high cholesterol and high blood pressure. Now my cholesterol is lower, my blood pressure is 116/70 and I lost 15 pounds.”

After being launched in Albert Lea, the Blue Zones program has now spread to Fort Worth, Texas; Naples, Florida; Southern California; across the state of Iowa and into Hawaii and Oregon.

### Healthy people, healthy economy

Albert Lea’s embrace of walking and other health activities is not just good for individuals, it’s good for the community as a whole, notes city manager Chad Adams. *Good Morning America* broadcast live from Fountain Lake Park to tell the country what was happening here—part of a wave of media attention that boosted the community’s image.

A centerpiece of Albert Lea’s economic development strategy has been to make downtown more walkable by widening sidewalks, eliminating unnecessary traffic lanes, restoring diagonal parking, replacing stoplights with stop signs, and “bumping out” sidewalks into the intersection, which short-

ens the crossing distance on busy streets. Almost immediately the 112 Broadway restaurant sprouted a sidewalk café, quickly followed by another restaurant and the local American Legion/VFW post.

Today the downtown is bustling with people on foot heading between the courthouse, the bank, the library, shops, churches, schools, restaurants, the Interchange coffee shop and the Sportsman’s Tavern.

“It makes downtown feel more like a downtown,” says Public Works Director Steve Jahnke. “All the improvements around town makes us feel more like a community—a sense of pride, more opportunities to talk to people, to do things.”

“With wider sidewalks, sociable activity on the streets and more public events, downtown has come back as the local gathering place,” Kehr observes.

“People who were skeptical are starting to see the fruit now that it’s done” says Adams, who notes that downtown saw 15 businesses open in the last two years, including a marketing firm, a furniture showroom, a boutique clothing store, a family restaurant and a yoga studio. Coming soon will be a bike shop. Thirteen new jobs were created downtown in the last year, with a number of others relocating from other parts of town. Up to \$2 million in private in-

vestment is slated for central business district this year, including housing geared to young professionals in historic buildings.

“Sales tax revenue is the highest it’s ever been, and most of that is attributable to downtown,” he says.

### Striding toward a bright future

Adams stresses that a lively, walkable community is key to attracting the young people and families that Albert Lea needs to thrive in decades to come. “It’s paramount that we grow our population and our tax base.”

Albert Lea’s embrace of healthy living convinced Adams himself to move his family from an affluent Minneapolis suburb five years ago, choosing the city manager post here over several other job opportunities. “My kids love it here. There is so much to do—riding bikes, walking on the trails, recreational opportunities in the parks and on the lakes, hanging out downtown. I was also impressed by the community-wide collaborative effort on the Blue Zones initiative to make positive change.”

And data show that the Adams family aren’t the only newcomers to town. “The number of kids in the K–2 grades is getting bigger—more than the high school classes. That shows we are attracting families,” he says.

“Small towns can reinvent themselves as places faster than big towns,” explains Dan Burden—one of America’s foremost authorities on walkable communities who helped Albert Lea’s citizens map out their original walking strategies in 2009 as part of the Blue Zones team, and has returned a number of times.



▲ Ellen Kehr has been a sparkplug for revitalizing Albert Lea.

▼ City manager Chad Adams moved with his family to Albert Lea in large part because of the campaign to make the town healthier.



“When I first came into Albert Lea, I’ll be honest, it looked like the downtown was closed,” he told a meeting of local officials. “There were businesses but there was no life in the streets. That’s changed now.”

Any success story is a tale of ups and downs. “We’ve had a lot of two steps forward, one step back,” explains Kehr, retired owner of a travel agency. “That’s how change happens.”

A poignant example for her was losing a re-election race for city council in 2012. Her longtime advocacy for a healthier community carried her into city hall, but opposition from an opponent arguing that changes like bike lanes were happening too fast in the ward blocked her re-election in 2012. “It was worth it to be on the city council and help get things started,” she says. “When I was beat, the mayor said, ‘What are we going to do without you?’ I told him he wouldn’t be without me. We’re going to do what we said—we’re just going to do it in another way. And we did.”

“The reason this work doesn’t burn me out is because of all the people I work with,” she adds. “When you share the work with a lot of other people, it buffers the disappointment. That’s how I keep going. And if I went away, they would continue the work.”



# What we can learn from Albert Lea

## Launch a communitywide effort

“We’re all doing this together, that’s our secret,” says health activist and former city council member Ellen Kehr. “You need to get everybody around the same table—business leaders, city officials, non-profit groups, educators, the YMCA, and the people who are interested in biking, walking, healthy food and healthy workplaces.”

“It has reconnected our community in a way that I never thought possible,” says Randy Kehr, executive director of the chamber of commerce (and husband of Ellen). “Sociability is as important to health as exercise and eating.”

## Form walking clubs

Make physical activity a social occasion people look forward to. In Albert Lea, walking groups are generally 4–10 people committed to walking together 3–7 times a week. Dennis Dieser, executive director of the local YMCA, tells of a group that gets together evenings to walk the grounds at a local school. “Ten times around the building is a mile,” he says, “and you see more and more people joining.”

## Create walking school buses

Kids and parents in several Albert Lea neighborhoods regularly get exercise on the way to and from school. A walking school bus works just like a motorized school bus, except without the bus. A parent picks up kids at their homes and takes them safely to school on foot.

## Find ways to make physical activity fun

A 5-mile walking continuous path was built around Fountain Lake, and the park’s boathouse was transformed into a full-fledged recreation center where kayaks, canoes, paddleboards, cross-country skis and snowshoes can be rented. A campaign is underway to raise money for a “splash pad” water playground in a downtown block right next to the lake.

## Enact a Complete Streets ordinance

Albert Lea was one of the first town in Minnesota to pass a law requiring that the needs of all road users be considered in transportation planning decisions, not just cars and trucks. This means any new subdivisions must be built with sidewalks, and reconstruction projects must pay attention to pedestrians’ concerns.

## Make sure healthy choices are easy choices

“A lot of what looks like individual choices are actually systemic problems—like when all the restaurants are fast food places or there are no safe places to walk,” Kehr says. “When you can build in more healthy options, that changes things.”

Sidewalks were added in strategic locations near schools, senior centers and businesses in Albert Lea to make walking more convenient. A bikeway along Front Street now connects a state park to downtown and a commercial street on the city’s west side, which has boosted bicycling 70 percent on the street. Most of the parent-led fundraisers at the schools are now walkathons instead of kids selling frozen pizza or baked goods door-to-door. Smoking has been banned in parks and most downtown open-air events.

—JAY WALLJASPER



## CASE STUDY : BIRMINGHAM, AL



▲ Encouraging kids to walk to school has been one strategy to promote health in Birmingham.

## Moving Toward a Healthy, Harmonious Future

Birmingham, a center of steel production, was for many years called the “Pittsburgh of the South.” It was also a stronghold of the Old South with an embarrassing history of discrimination against African Americans and violent opposition to civil rights, including the horrific bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in 1963.

Birmingham has faced new challenges over recent decades, as factories, jobs and many middle-class residents left the city. Birmingham’s population has become less healthy and more concentrated in communities with increasing poverty and social problems.

From 2000 to 2012, the percentage of Jefferson County’s population living at or below the federal poverty level increased from 12 to 19 percent. During the same period, children living in poverty increased from 10 to 28 percent, while adults over 64 years of age living in poverty increased from 22 to 78 percent. Obesity rates have jumped from 24 to 35 percent of the adult population during this same period.

## Birmingham

Walkscore

**33**

Walk to work

**2.3%**

Population density  
per square mile

**1,449**

Non-white population

**76.6%**

Median household income

**\$31,217**

Households below  
poverty level

**26.8%**

In 2002, the Jefferson County Department of Health (JCDH) initiated a strategic transformation to: (1) improve public health by changing communities and policies, and (2) achieve systemic change through partnership.

One result of this transformation is the Jefferson County Health Action Partnership (HAP), a coalition of more than 80 stakeholders committed to improving community health. The partnership grew out of an 18-month community-based assessment project, which established themes and

strengths, identified forces of change, and studied community health status. Based on this assessment, along with input from community members, the partnership compiled the report, *Our Community Roadmap to Health*, and embraced the mission “To improve health and quality of life throughout Jefferson County,” which began to be implemented in 2007.

### A better place to live, work, learn & play

The Jefferson County Health Action Partnership provided the structure to activate a group of citizens who wanted to change the image of the city and make it a healthier place to live, learn, work and play. They took a comprehensive approach that focused on economic development, education, and community health, with a particular emphasis on increasing people’s physical activity and improving neighborhood environments. The group used a systems approach that recognizes the importance of working with multilevel and multisector organizations to engage people to make healthy choices the easy choice.

This laid the groundwork for the Walk Bham campaign, which offered a simple way to educate people about safe, interesting places to exercise in neighborhoods all across the region. The first stage of the program focused on two walking routes (one in the central business district and the other in the East Lake Neighborhood), with the goal of encouraging people to be physically active, and highlighting the history and culture of Birmingham. East Lake is a low-income, mixed-race, suburban neighborhood where 50 percent of the children live in poverty. Almost half of the households are single individuals living alone. Walk Bham was funded by the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham together with the Jefferson County Department of Health and was led by the Fresh Water Land Trust.

In addition to the Walk Bham campaign, several schools began implementing Safe Routes to School programs, including walk-to-school days and walking school buses. Safe Routes to Schools was identified as a community health priority during a set of community meetings led by the Jefferson County Healthy Kids Coalition (a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation). In 2011, walking school buses (where parents accompanying kids walking to school) were launched at three elementary schools. This pilot program was so successful that Jefferson County earned national recognition, and expanded it to additional schools. In January 2015 the United Way of Central Alabama took over the program and made it part of its Community Initiatives Portfolio for the region.

As the Walk Bham and Safe Routes to Schools initiatives were taking hold, government agencies implemented engineering changes to make walking safer, and to offer better wayfinding on walking routes.

A vision emerged to provide Jefferson County with a network of walking trails, bike trails, and greenways that could serve as a commuter thoroughway and a recreation opportunity for many neighborhoods. The most recent addition is the Rotary Trail, which opened this year.



People involved with these initiatives came up with a rallying cry: “We are all public health!” which positions healthy communities as key to the future of the Birmingham region.

Jefferson County continues to address the social, economic, environmental and biological factors affecting health, as evident in Community Matters 20/20: Assessment, Visioning and Planning for a Healthy Jefferson County. Chaired by Jefferson County’s Health Officer, Mark Wilson, MD, with a steering committee composed of community leaders, the initiative’s statement declares, “Jefferson County Alabama is an inclusive, thriving community of healthy and connected people.”

The next step was the creation of a five-year Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) for Jefferson County that includes the promotion of walking and walkable communities with metrics to measure progress.

In December 2014, HAP adopted the five strategic issues from this plan as its priorities, and is currently reshaping its action around these priorities. The strategic issues are:

1. Reduce health disparities associated with race, ethnicity and economic status;
2. Promote physical well-being through healthy lifestyles;
3. Optimize the built environment, transportation system and safety;
4. Optimize healthcare access, availability and utilization;
5. Improve mental health.

The United Way of Central Alabama has also launched the [Bold Goals Coalition](#) to improve health, which has now merged with HAP to work within the Collective Impact model of social change.

Birmingham has many strong and committed people working to reframe, redesign and reenergize their community by partnering with many different types of organizations with complementary visions. Lakeshore Foundation is one of these groups, which wants to make sure that their members with disabilities and injured military veterans can benefit from the new trails by advocating for universal design and participating in these community initiatives.



◀ The Enon Ridge Trail is one of the first links in a countywide greenway network.

## Two walking champions

Bringing together the many pieces of walkability work in Birmingham took tenacious, inspirational and visionary leadership. This came from many people, including Bryn Manzella and Nick Sims.

### Bryn Manzella, health educator

Manzella is a health educator who spent most of her career conducting quality improvement programs in hospitals. When joining the Health Action Partnership, she had limited understanding of how the built environment could affect health. But she's a fast learner, and soon applied her background in developing partnerships to boost four priorities—Healthy Food Choices, Healthy Children and Youth, Livable Communities, and the Tobacco-Free Task Force—to find a “project that could be moved forward quickly and in a meaningful way.”

That initial project was Walk Bham, designed to take advantage of existing infrastructure to engage more people in physical activity, taking advantage of local assets like Birmingham's 130 parks.

It was when she began encouraging people to exercise in the parks that Manzella learned the importance of listening to the community: “Have you seen our park? Come look at our park; how do we make it look better?” said local residents.

“The level of community involvement in our project has been exciting,” she says. “There's commitment to face who we are and to fundamentally change it. Birmingham can be a vibrant city. We want to get past ‘Bombingham’ and create a place where our 26-year-olds are staying and seeing opportunities for greatness.”

Health equity is central to this new vision of a walkable community that is inclusive for everyone, she says. “We have a duty to take away barriers to active living. We are beginning to all talk the same message. Prioritize actions to those that need it most, and bring an army of people to help.”

“Given our history,” Manzella says, referring to racial discrimination, “Where we are today was not dreamable at one time.”



▲ Bryn Manzella's work as a health educator in hospitals got her involved with the advocacy group Walk Bham.

▼ Nick Sims pursues his passion for helping revitalize communities while working with The United Way of Central Alabama.



### Nick Sims, community development specialist

A coalition of diverse community members in Birmingham shares a vision of connected greenways and trails to make sure every child can safely walk to school, and to provide interesting destinations easily reached by bike.

One of the tireless champions of the greenway and trails project is Nick Sims, assistant vice president for early childhood education and healthy communities for the United Way of Central Alabama. He served in AmeriCorps VISTA out of college, where he found his passion for community development; so he got a Masters in Public Administration with a concentration in Community Development and Planning at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

After graduation, Sims landed a job with the Land Use Planning Department at the Jefferson County Commission, where he collaborated with external stakeholders, including the Jefferson

County Health Action Partnership. Soon his work evolved into highlighting the connections between the built environment and health—thanks to a Communities Putting Prevention to Work grant (CPPW) from the federal Centers for Disease Control.

He facilitated numerous community conversations on how to improve livability and public health in Jefferson County. Like many others in the community, he envisions a robust public transportation system for Birmingham that could transform how and where people live while also decreasing health disparities and chronic diseases through improved community design.

It became apparent during these public input sessions that citizens had a widespread desire for the principles of livability and better community design, even if they weren't familiar with concepts such as Complete Streets, transit-oriented development, or other planning best practices. Sims admits it took him a while to discover that "Something you think is a no-brainer may take a longer conversation to explain and receive public support."

To help people achieve dreams for their neighborhoods, Sims and his colleagues framed the issue around the experience of a student walking to school, drawing on the Health Action Partnership's existing work on Safe Routes to School. "If you talk about walkability from the perspective of a student's route to school, more people will listen," he says, noting that everyday language works better than planning jargon.

Sims explains how broader political realities complicate the organizing work on public health: strapped municipal budgets, competing political priorities, and unclear connections between taxes paid and services received. Trust in local government was low due to corruption and mismanagement, which led to a sewer debt crisis and ultimately, the county

declaring bankruptcy in 2011. Despite these many challenges, the CPPW grant provided a structure for launching preventive health projects. Walking and cycling groups were formed. The Red Rock Plan was developed, which helped secure an infrastructure grant to build bike lanes and pathways. People continued to get involved and were passionate about the possibilities.

"The community has been changed," says Sims. "People are moving back to the city and a variety of stakeholders are rallying around the momentum. More people are motivated and see the need to work on transportation equity and see a functional public transit system as the long-term goal."

"We are getting people to come together around a common agenda—we come together for the same outcomes, even if for different reasons. Groups are engaged via walking and cycling groups; new and improved parks are increasing access to quality greenspace; and a world class bikeshare program has recently launched. Now, the number of people active and involved has created a groundswell of support, and are expected to continue to drive the work forward."

## What we can learn from Birmingham

### Tap the local knowledge of communities

"We need to ask the communities. The people we work with are the scientists of what needs to be done." This is the most important first step in making walkable communities, says Bryn Manzella, a health educator working with Walk Bham. "I know very little; the community knows everything. My job is to listen and respond to what they need. This is a *we* thing."

### Seize the moment

Manzella reminds anyone undertaking community change to remember that we all have short attention spans. "So stop talking and start acting!" The energy to do something can dry up if it does not happen quickly. People move on.

### Focus on the community's concerns

Nick Sims, a community development specialist working with the United Way of Central Alabama, counsels all walking advocates to "listen well" and

"be sincere" when reaching out to communities, especially those with many pressing needs. Some neighborhoods are wary of outsiders due to a history of help being promised, but never actually happening. "This means spending time on what they need, addressing multiple issues at once, and letting conversations evolve," he explains. "Community-wide policy work is important, but a focus on specific neighborhood issues is essential to getting more people involved. Make sure you can help with what they need."

### Keep your eyes on the prize

"Keep the big picture in mind. Focus on health equity and notable health disparities," Sims explains, adding, "Find opportunities where you can. There is no silver bullet, but every small change matters. You just have to persevere."

—KATE KRAFT





## CASE STUDY : **BALDWIN PARK, CA**



▲ Baldwin Park suffered one of California's highest childhood obesity rates until the city got serious about improving walking conditions.

# Transforming a Car-Driven Suburb

Baldwin Park's successful campaign over the past 12 years to encourage more people to walk (which won recognition from the [Federal Highway Administration](#)) would be inspiring anywhere. Even more remarkable is that it's happening in Southern California—where the car has always been king.

Located 15 miles east of Los Angeles, Baldwin Park features the wide fast streets, numerous parking lots and drive-through restaurants that characterize communities built in the 1950s and 1960s. And they had the health stats to show for it: one of the highest [childhood obesity](#) rates in California and higher-than-average rates of childhood diabetes.

They also had a city council member, Marlen Garcia, determined to improve the city's health. "She was the god-mother of all that's now happened," says Salvador Lopez, the city's associate planner for 14 years, and now principal planner for Willdan Engineering.

Garcia works on public health issues in her job at Kaiser Permanente, the nation's largest integrated health care system, which operates a large medical center in Baldwin Park, so it was only natural that she raised tobacco use, healthy eating and physical activity as important issues on the city council.

## Baldwin Park

Walkscore

**45**

Walk to work

**1.6%**

Population density  
per square mile

**11,523**

Non-white population

**64.3%**

Median household income

**\$51,189**

Households below  
poverty level

**15.4%**

### Change starts with me

This city of 75,000 is also home to the California Center for Public Health Advocacy, which developed tools to involve a wide cross section of community in creating a healthier place to live. Working with the city and the California Endowment's Healthy Eating, Active Communities initiative, they launched the community group People On the Move (POTM) whose mission is "to reduce disparities in obesity and diabetes among school-aged children by improving the food and

physical environment."

POTM's first project was "Change Starts With Me"—a six-week training course for people wanting to promote better health in Baldwin Park. This led to a flurry of projects to improve the community's health: a program to include healthier foods at corner stores, nutrition labeling on restaurant menus, smoking restrictions in apartment buildings, new or improved sidewalks, a bike master plan, walking improvements downtown and a Safe Routes to School program.

"People really embraced this," says Lopez. "They wanted the sidewalks to be fixed. They wanted a safe route to walk their kids to school. They wanted new bike routes to ride on."

More than 500 people turned out over three days at a design fair about transportation planning. "We had phenomenal public engagement, especially from Spanish speakers," recalls Paul Zykovsky, associate director of the Local Government Commission, a consultant on the planning process. "We must have

had 90 kids in the daycare we provided on the opening night and lots of people turned out for the rock band in the park. On the closing day, we had another big crowd with a mariachi band."

Others turned out for neighborhood workshops at each of the city's 20 schools. Too-narrow sidewalks, too-fast traffic, dangerous street crossings and gang activity were major barriers to walking that people raised in the workshops, says transportation consultant Ryan Snyder, who formulated a street manual for the city based on people's concerns.

### Mobilizing low-income & immigrant communities

"Many immigrants from Latin America were involved in this process," Snyder observes. "They come from a tradition of people out walking in the streets and public squares. They have a different perspective on what streets and public spaces are for."

Baldwin Park's sizable lower-income population, many of whom don't own cars, also showed strong support for revitalizing the streets, says David Lopez, Baldwin Park's associate planner (no relation to Salvador). "We're a working-class city, and a lot of people come home from work tired and needing to reduce stress. A walk is good for that—even a short trip to the park."

"People out on the streets are also important for stopping crime," he adds. "When you make the streets more beautiful and safe, more people come out."

▼ Dozens of workshops were held throughout town so everyday people could voice their ideas.



A major victory came in 2011 with the passage of a Complete Streets policy—the first in Southern California and one of the strongest in the nation—which mandated that walkers, bicyclists and transit users be given equal priority with cars when planning decisions are made.

Two major avenues, which meet downtown, will soon be transformed from high-speed corridors favored by out-of-towners, to what the city calls “living streets,” meaning they cater to people on foot as well as automobiles.

▷ Ramona Blvd. will sport protected bike lanes, which also protect pedestrians because narrower traffic lanes reduce speeding and the bike lane itself serves as a buffer zone between the sidewalk and the street.

▷ Maine Avenue will be reconfigured from two vehicle lanes in each direction, to one lane with a turn lane in the middle. This increasingly popular innovation is usually known as a 4-3 conversion, but Salvador Lopez believes it is more accurately described

as a 4-5 conversion, since bike lanes on either side of the street add more capacity for mobility.

Results so far show that Baldwin Park is meeting its goal of becoming a healthier place for kids to grow up. A study of the first five years charted a 13 percent decline in the body mass index of students in public schools. Later research confirmed that the childhood obesity rate has continued to drop.



▲ City planner David Lopez says walking is important to working class families.



▼ Marlen Garcia is the godmother of local walking efforts.

## What we can learn from Baldwin Park

### Make it easy to get involved

Former Baldwin Park planner Salvador Lopez remembers being shocked when 300 people turned out for a walking workshop. “I knew the topic interested people, and many families made the extra effort to come out because there was free daycare, healthy snacks and free pumpkins—it was right before Halloween.”

### Mobilize businesses

“We created a business roundtable made up of businesses along the major corridors,” Salvador Lopez notes, “to show how slower traffic and wider sidewalks could increase their profitability because more people would walk into their shops. Business support was important to making things happen.”

### Apply for grants

There’s money out there to help you achieve your goals, advises Salvador Lopez. “Grant writing is just telling a story about why you need funding with statistics to prove it. Then you tell the story of what you want your community to be, and how you’re going to get there.”

### Include everyone

Transportation consultant Ryan Snyder was impressed with the wide public participation in Baldwin Park’s planning process. “The more people feel involved, the more they feel the plan is theirs and the more support you’ll have for changes.”

### Speak people’s language

David Lopez, who was born in El Salvador, means this literally. Baldwin Park is 45 percent immigrant, largely from Latin America, so Spanish-speaking presenters at every community meeting made a huge difference.

### Talk about “living streets”

This means acknowledging streets’ important role as public spaces, where farmers’ markets, festivals and other public gatherings can be held. The main square—zocalo—found in most Mexican towns offers an appealing example.

—JAY WALLJASPER





## CASE STUDY : BATESVILLE, AR



▲ Downtown Batesville, once riddled with empty storefronts, sprang back to life after pedestrian improvements were made.

# This Town is Made For Walking, Hiking & Strolling

As a physical education teacher at Batesville Middle School for 20 years, Rick Elumbaugh got a pretty clear picture of his community's future—and was concerned by some of what he saw.

Many of the students he taught headed off to college or the military, and never looked back. “One boy who took my mountain biking class in 2004 is a case in point. Completed college in Little Rock, medical degree at the University of Missouri in Columbia, and now we’ve lost him,” he [told](#) Ian Thomas, state and local program director at [America Walks](#). “He loves the bike trails and vibrant downtown lifestyle too much to come back.”

“Our Main Street was dying,” Elumbaugh says. The community lacked gathering spots where people could run into friends or get to know other folks.

“And the health of young men and women was an issue,” he adds. “Some can’t even pass the physical to get into the military. All this drove me to run for mayor.”

Elumbaugh viewed walking and outdoor recreation as one solution to these problems, and made it a theme of his 2007 campaign, which he won with 70 percent of the vote in this town of 10,000 in north-eastern Arkansas. He went to work immediately to

## Batesville

Walkscore

**64**

Walk to work

**4.1%**

Population density  
per square mile

**946**

Non-white population

**9.4%**

Median household income

**\$37,150**

Households below  
poverty level

**17%**

transform the community, drawing on the same discipline and sense of purpose he instilled in a generation of Batesville 8th graders.

### Making walking safe, convenient & enjoyable

One of his first actions was an ordinance requiring sidewalks in all new residential developments, followed by construction of 4 miles of sidewalks along the highway running through town, where many businesses are located. Deteriorating sidewalks in the historic

downtown district were also rebuilt to encourage more people to get out and move.

Batesville already had a popular riverfront walking trail, which became the starting point for the new 2-mile Greenway trail serving two schools. This fall a new community and recreation center opens along the Greenway, with an indoor track and aquatic center as well as ballfields. A half-mile Greenway extension is in the works to expand the popular walking and biking network to reach another school.

“Greenways are a quality-of-life issue,” the mayor declares. “From sunup to sundown you see people on it. I hit the trail about five days a week, and last year I ran into one of the city mechanics on it. I’d never seen him on the trail before. He had a defibrillator strapped on to him, and told me the doctors said he needed to lose 100 pounds.”

“I saw him again a few months later, and I didn’t even recognize him—he had to call out to me. He said he’d lost a lot of weight by walking and diet.”



▲ Gym teacher Rick Elumbaugh ran for mayor because he worried about how few young people were staying in town.

The push to make walking safer, easier and more fun in Batesville is also bringing life back to the downtown. “Walkability is part of our business strategy,” explains Elumbaugh. “It’s about making a healthier community, but also an economically vibrant community.”

Four years ago, about half the storefronts on Main Street were empty—now it’s only 5 percent, after a concerted effort to enhance the area’s appeal for pedestrians. Buildings are under construction downtown for the first time since the 1970s, and a sidewalk café has appeared along with a small business incubator, Mexican restaurant, coffee shop, flower shop, yogurt shop, bakery and two hair salons. A shuttered opera house will reincarnate as a performing arts venue/event center, and the library is looking at a move into a landmark 1903 building.

The positive changes for Batesville go beyond just commerce. “I can look out my window in City Hall, and see people strolling down the street, including young families pushing baby strollers. We are beginning to see some of the young millennials coming to town.”

Joel Williams, 32, who worked in the film business in New Orleans and Los Angeles, is one of them. Love, not walkability, was the primary reason for his move, but he’s enthusiastic about living and raising a family in Batesville. “It’s a great place where you can get to know everybody just going down the street. So much is happening here.”



▲ Retired Navy Admiral Bob Carius (with shovel) helped steer the downtown revival.

### Resuscitating Main Street

Elumbaugh is quick to point out that city officials can't revitalize a town all by themselves. They must work shoulder-to-shoulder with citizens and business owners. One of the mayor's chief allies is Bob Carius, an 87-year-old retired Navy admiral, who is president of Main Street Batesville, a nonprofit business and community partnership.

"We're the oldest city in Arkansas with many beautiful old houses, but the downtown was slowly becoming a slum area because of all the vacant buildings," Carius recalls. "We are shifting that because people came together to make it happen."

The first step in this turnaround was bringing in a pair of community vitality experts for a brainstorming session: [Dan Burden](#) of Blue Zones, who's worked in more than 3500 towns across North America; and [Ian Thomas](#) of America Walks, who is also a city council member in Columbia, Missouri.

Thomas remembers the mayor explaining to them, "Decades of trying to accommodate automobiles had made Main Street inhospitable—even hostile—to pedestrians, and that the city would need to reverse that trend in order to bring back its former vibrancy."

Carius felt the same way. "We had to do something dramatic to show people we meant business about changing Main Street."

And that's exactly what's happening, thanks to ideas first voiced by residents at a public workshop. Main Street is being narrowed from two one-way lanes to one, with the extra space used to enhance the streetscape with greenery, lampposts and traditional angle parking. Stoplights were removed, and curbs are being widened at intersections to make it safer to cross. The street meanders a bit, with the parking shifting from one side to the other through the five-block downtown. One block is already done with three more under construction now, and fundraising underway to finance the final block.

Mayor Elumbaugh notes that walking downtown is immeasurably more pleasant now that average vehicle speeds have downshifted from 25 mph to 10 mph, with through traffic moving to adjacent streets. "The plan has 70 percent public approval," he says proudly. "There's no resistance from the merchants at all. Some of the old generation doesn't like it, but everyone else does."

"Opposition has all but dispersed except for one woman who just berates me constantly about taking out the stoplights," Carius adds. "But I saw her husband recently and he told me you can actually travel faster even though you drive slower now because the stoplights are gone."

"We conceived this as an economic development project that will attract millennials to live here and tourists to visit," he adds. "It's fortuitous that it's good for public health and that the people who live near downtown like it so much."



## What we can learn from Batesville

### Keep costs down

The low pricetag of the downtown transformation curbed opposition, notes Bob Carius, a retired Navy admiral and president of the Main Street Batesville partnership. At about \$20,000 a block, it was not necessary to use tax money. Grants, civic organizations, business owners and individuals paid for it. Local banks even chipped in to bring walkability experts to town. At first, the new community and recreation center was rejected by voters in a 2010 referendum, but passed two years later after the budget was trimmed and a more strenuous campaign staged to trumpet its benefits.

### Make it easy for city officials to do the right thing

If you want major change in your community, Carius counsels, “Don’t make the city council do it all on their own. You need to protect elected officials by getting civic groups behind the plans too. We had people from 19 different groups working on the downtown streetscape plan, which we ourselves presented to the city council.”

### Engage your opponents

Mayor Rick Elumbaugh advises speaking directly with skeptics of walkability plans. “Show them the statistics about walking and health. Reach out to national groups that can help you make the case—that really helped us here.”

### Mobilize young people

Most of all, Elumbaugh adds, “Get young people involved. They’re great advocates. The millennials want to walk and have more places to walk to—that’s what attracts young families. I’ve had a few of my old students come back because of how we are rebuilding the community.”

—JAY WALLJASPER

▼ Batesville’s Greenway Trail will soon connect the riverfront with three schools and a new recreation center.





▲ University Place, a Seattle suburb, excels in making streets that cater to people on foot as well as cars.

## Not Just For Big Cities Anymore

Like skyscrapers and nightclubs, walking is often viewed as a distinctly urban attraction. But the truth is that walking for transportation, recreation and exercise has always been part of suburban and small town life—now more than ever as people rediscover the joys of moving under their own power. Here are some inspiring examples coast-to-coast.

### Suburbs on the move

#### 1. Bethesda, MD (pop. 63,000)

Real estate developer and business professor Christopher Leinberger calls the D.C. region the most walkable metropolitan area in the U.S., edging out New York City on the strength of its pedestrian-friendly suburban areas. Bethesda Row, a newly built downtown with the charm and usefulness of a traditional town center, is a great example of how walking thrives beyond the urban city limits.

#### 2–3. Kirkland (pop. 86,000) & University Place (pop. 31,000), WA

The Seattle area is neck-and-neck with D.C. in creating walkable suburbs. Dan Burden, one of America's leading experts on pedestrian-friendly communities who works with Blue Zones lauds Kirkland because of “four of America's best” pedestrian-friendly arterial streets, significant new development downtown, an urban village created out of a strip mall, and a 5.7-mile long multiuse trail with excellent street crossings. Meanwhile, the community of University Place, he adds, “has become one of the most studied turnaround stories in North America, winning one award after another for its roads and

parks. In just 20 years, sidewalks have been built on virtually every block. Numerous roads were put on ‘diets’ to shrink their way to greater safety, and now University Place has a true town center underway.”

#### 4. Edina, MN (pop. 48,000)

In 1956, this town just outside Minneapolis inaugurated the modern suburban era by opening the first enclosed shopping mall surrounded by acres of parking, a defining feature of late 20th century life. Now Edina is working hard to evolve into a 21st century suburb, where there’s a place for walking and biking too. Bike lanes are sprouting on many streets and some four-lane roads have been downsized to three lanes with a turning lane in the middle to curtail speeding drivers and create more space for sidewalks. Even the historic shopping mall, Southdale,

is more pedestrian friendly, thanks to a [\\$4 million overhaul](#) of nearby streets. City officials and some developers are responding to young families’ wishes for safer streets and more places to walk and bike.

#### 5. Lakewood, CO (pop. 143,000)

This Denver suburb replaced a failing shopping mall with Belmar, a new development built from scratch to resemble a downtown that offers shops, homes, offices, restaurants, movies, a town common, a bowling alley and an Irish pub, all within close and pleasant walking distance.

#### 6. Marion, IA (pop. 35,000)

Next door to much bigger Cedar Rapids, Marion is implementing big plans to make the community more walkable, including an ambitious initiative to fill public spaces with art.

## Smaller towns are going places

#### 7. [Anaconda, MT](#) (pop. 9000)

After a Community Health Assessment showed alarming rates of diabetes and obesity, Anaconda has set its sights on becoming more walkable. They brought in [Walk \[Your City\]](#) to add new street signs directing people to places within walking distance, and [America Walks](#) to brainstorm ways to encourage more people to walk. The city is now implementing plans to make downtown safer and more inviting for pedestrians.

#### 8. [Hernando, MS](#) (pop. 14,000)

Named the healthiest community in the state by the Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Mississippi Foundation, Hernando requires developers to install sidewalks in all new and redevelopment projects, sponsors a [Safe Routes to School](#) program for kids, sponsors active living classes and has passed a [Complete Streets](#) law that promotes walking and biking.

#### 9. [Hendersonville, NC](#) (pop. 13,000)

A busy road bisecting downtown was narrowed to two lanes with wider sidewalks and traffic calming features. The results: an increase in people walking and a plunge in retail vacancies to almost zero.

#### 10. [Murray, KY](#) (pop. 18,000)

The streets here were so dangerous that children were prohibited from walking or biking to school. That spurred local officials to build three miles of sidewalks around schools and in low-income neighborhoods.

#### 11–18. [Towns across Iowa](#)

The Blue Zones project begun in Albert Lea, Minnesota, has now spread across Iowa, including the smaller communities of Muscatine (pop. 23,000), Mason City (pop. 28,000), Algona (pop. 5,500), Harlan (pop. 5,000), Woodbine (pop. 1,500), Fairfield (pop. 9,500), Spencer (pop. 17,000), and Spirit Lake (pop. 5,000).

—JAY WALLJASPER





▲ With interest in long-distance hiking on the rise, the Philadelphia area already boasts a 300-mile network of trails, which will expand to 750 miles across nine counties.

# Philly & Indy Showcase Innovations for the Long Haul

A surprisingly “pedestrian” subject came into focus for Hollywood in three recent movies. Millions of Americans watched Reese Witherspoon hike the Pacific Crest Trail in *Wild*, Robert Redford ramble the Appalachian Trail in *A Walk in the Woods*, and Martin Sheen make a pilgrimage on Spain’s Santiago de Compostela path in *The Way*.

Long-distance walking is gaining popularity as exercise, adventure and spiritual awakening. In 1974, Linda Kay Davidson and David Gitlitz, authors of *Pilgrimage*, trod 500 miles across Northern Spain on the Compostela path used by religious pilgrims since Medieval times, and did not see any other hikers. Forty years later, more than 200,000 make the journey every year.

Two groundbreaking projects in the US let city and suburban dwellers cover many miles in their own backyard.

## A wide web of trails around Philadelphia

Folks in and around Philadelphia now have the chance to walk 300 miles in their own backyard, thanks to a network of multi-use trails along old rail lines, towpaths, rivers and streams in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The Circuit Trails traverse urban, suburban and rural lands to the delight of hikers, bikers, joggers and casual strollers.

“For the past five years, a web comprising [at least] 30 multi-use pathways known as the [Circuit Trails](#) has been growing throughout the Greater Philadelphia area, with long-term plans to stretch 750 miles across nine counties,” reports [Rails to Trails magazine](#), published by the [Rails-to-Trails Conservancy](#),

one of 65 organizations involved in the pioneering project. When completed in 2040, the Circuit will offer a trail within a mile’s walk of half the households in the entire metropolitan region.

“Imagine walking out your front door and heading north or south, east or west, and spending all day biking or walking on trails,” asks the website of the [Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia](#), one of the chief organizers of the project. “Trails are not just for recreation. They can get us to work, to the grocery store or to nearby green space. Trails allow us to cross paths with our neighbors as we walk our dogs, build exercise into our daily routes, and take us to places we’ve never been.”

## A 21st century walk-bike path in Indianapolis

Indianapolis, a city best known for speeding race cars, also points us toward a brighter future for walking. The [Indianapolis Cultural Trail](#), an 8-mile bicycle and pedestrian path winding in and out of downtown, is being heralded as a 21st century transportation breakthrough. Planners and livability advocates from scores of cities around the world have visited to study its elegant design and inge-

nious engineering for ideas in making walking and biking more safe, comfortable and fun. “The trail is putting [Indianapolis on the map](#) as a place to see bold innovation,” reports the *New York Times*.

“The design team researched similar projects in cities around the world—Copenhagen, Paris, Bogotá, Boulder,” lead designer Kevin Osburn of the Indianapolis-based landscape architecture firm



Rundell Ernstberger Associates told the *Times*. “We discovered that there really wasn’t quite anything like what we were attempting to do anywhere in the world.”

For most of its length, the Cultural Trail separates walkers from both bikes and cars, offering a safe haven. With a stylish diamond pattern on the pavement and in crosswalks, plus handsome benches and lampposts made of gleaming steel, the trail offers an altogether pleasing atmosphere for strolling. An added benefit of this distinctive design is that you always know when you’re on the trail, which often twists and turns on its way through town.

Walkscore, which quantifies the walkability of any location in the U.S., now declares downtown Indianapolis a “Walker’s Paradise.” The Cultural Trail effortlessly connects with other biking and walking trails fanning across the city, allowing nonmotorized travelers to cover a lot of ground unmolested by auto traffic.

Real estate values along the trail have increased by \$1 billion since the first segment opened seven years ago, with properties within a block of the trail seeing an average 148 percent increase, according to the Indiana University Public Policy Institute. Three once-struggling neighborhood business districts have bounced back, and new apartment buildings, offices and stores are being constructed adjacent to the trail.

Twelve years in the planning, the \$63 million project was conceived and carried out by the Central Indiana Community Foundation in partnership with the City of Indianapolis with financial support from local philanthropists, including a \$15 million gift from Gene & Marilyn Glick, along with federal grants.

—JAY WALLJASPER



▲ The Indianapolis Cultural Trail is being heralded as the future of urban bike-walk pathways.





▲ Boulder's Pearl Street Mall is the heart of the community.

## An Idea Whose Time Has Come (Again)

Pedestrian zones—traffic-free streets that make walkers feel at ease—can be found throughout Europe, and are increasingly common in the Middle East, Asia and Latin America. They are beloved spots for kids to romp, teenagers to gather, lovers to linger, women to show off their new clothes (and discreetly admire the charms of passersby), men to admire the charms of passersby (and discreetly show off their new clothes), and everybody to feel part of a wider community.

But in the U.S., pedestrian streets are as rare as white squirrels. You spot a few in college towns like Boulder, Colorado; Burlington, Vermont; Charlottesville, Virginia; Ithaca, New York; and Iowa City, Iowa; as well as Boston, Santa Monica and some resort communities.

### The fall & rise of pedestrian streets

The reason for the dramatic shortage of car-free spaces in U.S. cities compared with the rest of the world is usually explained this way: “We tried pedestrian malls [streets] in the 1970s and no one liked them. Most of the downtown stores closed after they were put in, and nearly every city now has put traffic back on the streets where it belongs.”

That’s not the whole story. The great majority of those experiments were transit malls, where people walking were kept out of the streets by buses. And in most cases, they were built as last-ditch efforts to save retail businesses downtown, which were failing due to competition from outlying shopping malls. It’s not clear that any innovation could have reversed this sweeping trend.

Another reason transit malls failed was because they offered very little to do besides shopping, says Fred Kent, president of [Project for Public Spaces](#).

“To have a successful pedestrian street,” Kent says, “we have to begin thinking of streets as places in themselves, not just as a corridor for traffic, shopping, or any other single use. That means there must be many different things for people to do while walking the streets.”

The dramatic revival of many downtowns over the past three decades prove his point. Successful downtowns offer people a bounty of activities: dining, nightlife, coffee shops, office space, theater, public art, recreation, schools, galleries, music venues, public spaces, and wide sidewalks for strolling. The success of lifestyle centers, essentially outdoor pedestrian streets lined by stores and surrounded by parking lots, also suggests the time is right for reintroducing car-free spaces back into the heart of American cities.

New York City is already converting scattered sections of streets into plazas for people on foot. “The streets of New York make up a quarter of the city’s area and 80 percent of all its public spaces,” noted former New York City transportation commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan, explaining why it’s important to give more space to people on foot.

In downtown Brooklyn, Madison Square, the Meatpacking District, Chelsea, on Broadway, and other places across the five boroughs of New York, some traffic lanes have been closed off for pedestrian use only—a bold move that, much to the surprise of skeptical New Yorkers, has worked well. People gather there to eat lunch, read and relax in the middle of some of the busiest streets in the world. These projects are the start of an ambitious plan to give every neighborhood in the city a public plaza of its own.

This is happening, although less dramatically, in other places too. “Walk blocks”—short sections of streets as small as a half-block being converted to pedestrian space—are appearing in diverse cities such as Atlanta; Pittsburgh; Riverside, California; Rochester, Minnesota; and Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island.

Don’t underestimate what can arise from these small beginnings. Even a brief stretch of car-free pavement empowers people on foot to realize that the road belongs to them too. Jan Gehl, the influential Danish designer who helped create Copenhagen’s now expansive pedestrian district in the 1960s, has long counseled cities to start small with car-free zones and add to it bit by bit through the years.

—JAY WALLJASPER



▲ The Church Street Marketplace in Burlington, Vermont, draws crowds in all seasons.





▲ The Speck family lives car-light in the Boston suburb of Brookline, meaning they drive just one car.

## More of Us Now Live Car Free (or Car Light)

It's becoming eminently practical and increasingly common for many folks to live without a car or Car Light (one car per household), relying on walking for transportation needs along with transit, biking, taxis, carshare, bike-share and ride-hailing services like Uber or Lyft.

Most of the attention focuses on Millennials, who are getting drivers' licenses and buying cars at lower rates than previous generations. But this shift includes many older Americans too. Here's what's driving—er, causing—the trend toward car free and car light living:

### Less driving

Overall, Americans are driving less per capita than they did 10 years ago, reversing a century-long pattern of ever-increasing auto use.

### Increasing popularity of walking

A recent survey from the National Association of Realtors finds that 79 percent of Americans believe it's important to live within an easy walk of places they want to go.

### More Americans riding buses & trains

Local bus and rail service is expanding and improving in many places, with total ridership up a sizable 37 percent since 1995. Nearly all transit trips rely on walking at both ends.

### Technological breakthroughs

Getting along without a car today involves fewer hassles than just a few years ago, thanks to smartphones linked to the Internet. A new report from



the Frontier Group identifies 11 new technologies that can “reduce your need to own a car,” including new services such as multi-modal apps (which offer expertise on walking routes) along with up-to-the-minute transit schedules or the ability to hail a ride very quickly.

### Telecommuting

Driving to and from work can eat up a lot of your day, which is why growing numbers of people work online from home all or part of the time.

## Should you give up a car?

Think what you could do with an extra \$8500 each year. That’s about the cost [AAA calculates](#) you spend owning a car every year. “People [who] can live without a car, or one less car—it’s like winning the lottery,” says Gil Penalosa of 8 80 Cities, who lives without a car in Toronto. He notes that \$8500 could be applied to retirement accounts, college funds, vacations, entertainment, eating out, hobbies, charity or other aspirations.

Real estate developer [Christopher Leinberger](#) who lives Car Light in Washington, D.C., adds, “\$8500 in additional expenses is something that many ... Americans can’t afford. And for others, it translates into an extra \$150,000 worth of mortgage” for a home they really want.

Ken and Roberta Avidor, both illustrators in St. Paul, Minnesota, made a snap decision to go carless one day when their vehicle broke down on the freeway. They have no regrets. “Besides saving a lot of money and hassle, there are the health benefits of walking and biking more,” Ken says. “And we feel mental health benefits too. We have more contact with people and lead a more convivial life.”

Patricia Blakely, who now works part-time as a spiritual director at a church in Minneapolis, says, “I feel healthier because walking is now built into my day, every day.” In fact before giving up her car, she was diagnosed with osteoporosis in her spine and hip, but a recent bone density test downgraded the condition to pre-osteoporosis.



▲ Patricia Blakely of Minneapolis gave up her car several years ago and says she now feels healthier and experiences more “sights, sounds and scents” than when she drove everywhere.

Blakely walks to the grocery store, bank, restaurants and a favorite coffee shop in her neighborhood—which is mostly single-family homes with yards, not a dense cluster of apartment buildings. “You might think living without a car would close off options and make my world smaller, but instead my world opened up in some surprising ways,” she says. “I experienced the sights, the sounds and the scents in a way that I would have missed driving.”

“We have one car, which we drive mostly for pleasure, like going to the country or visiting my parents, and occasionally for convenience like driving the kids to school in a heavy rain,” explains Jeff Speck, an urban designer who lives and works in the Boston suburb of Brookline. But most of the time, Speck, his wife, and their boys aged 9 and 7, walk or take transit. “It’s not some kind of statement about our virtue or our weirdness. It’s simply an opportunity that a good, well-designed community gives you,” says Speck, author of the book *Walkable City*.

*Arlington County, Virginia’s Car Free Diet program offers some [illuminating videos](#) about people who accepted a challenge to live car-free for a month. Adapted from “Living a Car-Free Life” by Jay Walljasper, for AARP Livable Communities, [aarp.org/livable](#).*

—JAY WALLJASPER



# The Movement for Healthier & Happier Lives: A Resource Guide

There are few things more basic to human life than walking.

We lost sight of this fact over recent decades, building new communities all over the world where moving on foot feels risky or unappealing. That's beginning to change now as research shows that the simple act of walking offers surprising benefits for our health and the vitality of our neighborhoods.

Indeed, a movement is emerging across America to encourage people to walk more and to make our communities more walkable, which is gaining support from a wide range of backers.

Among the national organizations leading the charge:

- ▶ The [Every Body Walk Collaborative](#), a diverse network of organizations with an interest in walking—ranging from the NAACP to the National PTA to AARP and the YMCA—powered by the integrated health system Kaiser Permanente.
- ▶ [America Walks](#), which engages and empowers local advocates through a network of 700 allied organizations, and works to develop the national movement to make America a better place to walk.
- ▶ The [Alliance for Biking & Walking](#), a coalition of more than 200 state and local walking and bicycling advocacy organizations.
- ▶ [Rails-to-Trails Conservancy](#), which promotes the creation of rail trails and regional trail systems, with a goal of creating more walkable, bikeable communities.



- ▶ [Safe Routes to Schools National Partnership](#), which focuses on how to encourage more children to walk and bike to school, and how to make our communities safe for them to do it.
- ▶ [National Center for Safe Routes to Schools](#), a clearinghouse for information at the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center.
- ▶ [Girl Trek](#), which focuses on promoting walking among African American women to improve health.
- ▶ [AARP](#), which promotes walking for people of all ages as part of its Livable Communities program.
- ▶ [Smart Growth America](#), a coalition of organizations championing more walkable communities, which sponsors the Complete Streets Coalition and LOCUS, a network of real estate developers and investors focusing on walkable communities.
- ▶ [American College of Sports Medicine](#), an association of medical, scientific and fitness professionals, which documents the benefits of physical activity and sponsors the [Exercise is Medicine](#) initiative.
- ▶ [Vision Zero Network](#), a new organization committed to helping U.S. communities eliminate bicycling and pedestrian fatalities—while increasing safe, healthy, equitable mobility for all.
- ▶ [8 80 Cities](#), an international group working on how to make communities safe, accessible and enjoyable for people of all ages.
- ▶ [Blue Zones](#) helps local communities increase walking and other healthy habits based on principles uncovered by *National Geographic* explorer Dan Buettner's investigations of communities around the world where people live the longest.
- ▶ [Walkable and Livable Communities Institute](#), which aids local communities to improve walking conditions.
- ▶ [National Center for Bicycling & Walking](#), a program of Project for Public Spaces that hosts the popular biennial Pro Walk/Pro Bike/Pro Place conference.



- ▶ [Project for Public Spaces](#), which since 1975 has worked with more than 3,000 local communities to enhance walkability by creating and improving public places.
  - ▶ [Active Living By Design](#), created by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to increase physical activity in daily life through better community design and public policy.
  - ▶ [Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center](#), an institute at the University of North Carolina that promotes safe walking and bicycling, and runs the [Walk Friendly Communities](#) program to highlight successful policies in the top communities for walking.
  - ▶ [National Recreation & Parks Association](#), which is involved in promoting walking and physical activity as part of its mission in advancing public parks.
  - ▶ [Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professionals](#), which promotes the exchange of knowledge among people working on walking issues in government, business, advocacy groups, universities and consulting firms.
  - ▶ [Rail-Volution](#), organizers of the annual Rail-Volution conference, which focuses on the crucial role of walking as well as transit in creating livable communities.
  - ▶ [Center for Transportation Excellence](#), an information clearinghouse for communities that want to create better transportation choices through ballot initiatives and other civic campaigns.
  - ▶ [Institute of Transportation Engineers](#), the professional organization of engineers who plan and build our streets, sidewalks and trails.
  - ▶ [Kaiser Permanente](#), the nation's largest integrated healthcare system, focuses on the health and well-being of its members and communities by promoting physical activity as one factor in maintaining total health.
  - ▶ Many public health agencies and organizations, ranging from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to the Sioux Falls (SD) Public Health Department to the grassroots group Healthy Central Florida.
  - ▶ And national work is only one leg of the walking movement, the other being local groups that have been pushing for better walking conditions in their hometowns—some like [Transportation Alternatives](#) in New York City, [Feet First](#) in Seattle, and [Walk Boston](#) for more than 20 years.
- JAY WALLJASPER**



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