

America's Most Walkable Cities

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Do you ever walk to the local book store or ice cream shop on a whim? Could you? There was a time, not too long ago, when it was easy for most people to get to a corner store for a quick-fix of Chaucer or cappuccino chip. Homes were close to "Mom & Pop" stores, and traffic moved at a gentle pace over quiet streets. But over the years it's become more and more challenging to get around on foot. Restrictive zoning isolates residential areas far from retail shopping, and ever-widening traffic lanes and huge parking lots create unsafe barriers to pedestrians.

Now, owning a big walled-in house with a giant yard and two cars in the driveway has long been "The American Dream," but that dream is changing: People are longing to be a part of a community again, rather than feeling isolated from their neighbors. And being able to amble around town on foot can be a big part of that sense of community. We're not necessarily talking Mayberry here, but wouldn't it be nice if you could walk a few blocks from your home to get a haircut from Floyd, or to shoot the breeze with Sheriff Taylor? With so many people employed at big companies like [Title Max](#) it can be difficult to even think about walking to work, especially if the company is located in a big [office](#) or industrial park. To that end, many communities are bucking the trend of sprawling anti-pedestrian development, with individuals and groups working to make their cities more walkable.

In Portland, Oregon, for example, Ellen Vanderslice has organized "Pedestrian Actions" where up to 50 pedestrians would (legally) block speeding traffic at dangerous elementary school crosswalks. According to Vanderslice the actions "raised both motorist and pedestrian awareness of the state law in Oregon which gives pedestrians right-of-way at every intersection." The protesters were also successful in getting speed humps installed at many of the "most grossly offensive" intersections. In Austin, Texas, members of a group known as WALK Austin keep in contact with City Council members and attend public hearings. Katherine Shriner, the group's President says, "we conducted a Walkability Evaluation of the city and produced a 10-minute documentary about it. We are also represented on a city task force concerning the funding, prioritization and design of a sidewalk network in Austin, and we supported the creation of a pedestrian coordinator in the city public works department."

The accomplishments of groups like these, although impressive, are just a start: Creating "walkability" goes far beyond laying down speedbumps and pedestrian walkways. So what, exactly, is a walkable city? According to the experts, America's most walkable communities share the following attributes:

1. Compact and diverse development--

Zoning is not unduly restrictive, so you CAN find a corner grocery store, coffee shop, theater, school or church within walking distance of where you live and [work](#). Common in Europe, and in older American cities, compact development has been anathema to US city planners since the end of World War II. To enhance walkability, places like Boulder, Colorado have created "urban growth rings" around the city that prevent development beyond a certain geographic boundary, which ensures compact, mixed-use development inside the ring.

So what can YOU do?

One way you can this kind of development in your community is by "voting with your feet." Instead of driving to the mall, support your local merchants by walking to shops close to your home. Jean Jackson, who nominated her hometown of Exeter, NH as one of America's most walkable communities takes a day pack with her as she "walks" errands at the post office, bakery, and bookstores around town. If you can't get what you need close to home, try bicycling or public transportation. On a grander scale, you can attend and speak up at zoning board and development meetings, and you can put yourself into a more walkable environment by buying a house in a mixed-use neighborhood instead of that "martini ranch" on a two-acre lot five miles outside of town.

2. Places to walk--

Are there meaningfully connected, wide, well-maintained sidewalks and pedestrian paths that connect homes with shops and other destinations? Xenia, Ohio, a former railroad hub, is in the process of converting miles of abandoned railroad tracks to 10-12 foot wide paved trails that connect the town's schools, churches, businesses and shopping areas. "The ultimate goal," says County Special Projects Coordinator, Charles Dressler, "is to have a pathway within 10 minutes of every home in Greene County and within 5 minutes of every home in the City of Xenia."

So what can YOU do?

You can help maintain your existing walking paths by keeping the sidewalk in front of your own house clear of snow and debris, and by petitioning for more walkways, traffic controls and "traffic calming" devices like speed bumps.

3. No impassable barriers--

If there are obstacles like major roadways, rivers and train tracks, can you cross them safely on foot without going far out of your way? In Chattanooga, Tennessee you can. The 115-year old Walnut Street Walking Bridge--the longest pedestrian bridge in the nation--is one of several downtown bridges that carry pedestrians over the Tennessee River. The bridges link the more than 20 miles of reclaimed riverfront that make up the new Tennessee Riverpark--a pedestrian wonderland of bicycle and pedestrian paths, nature trails, picnic areas, a sculpture garden, and an aquarium.

So what can YOU do?

If there are impassable barriers around your neighborhood, don't simply pick another route, do what citizens did in Chattanooga: Report the problem areas to local traffic engineer or public works department and alert local media to the problem.

4. Beauty--

Is it aesthetically pleasing to walk to your destination? Are there trees, public parks, public art, benches and fountains along the way? Portland, Oregon, whose pedestrian-friendly city center is sprinkled with small pocket parks and public benches, is also a public art leader. In January of 1989, the Portland City Council adopted an ordinance which dedicates 1.33% of the total cost of all improvement projects to the acquisition and maintenance of public art.

So what can YOU do?

Keep your own neighborhood beautiful by taking a small plastic bag with you on your walks to pick up trash

along the way. Plant trees, flowers and shrubs in your yard, and organize a community cleanup day or an Arbor Day tree planting party.

5. Safety--

Is it safe to walk where you need to go? Are drivers courteous to pedestrians, and are there traffic controls (and enforcement) to ensure that they are? If there are "unsafe" areas, are there easy alternate routes to get you where you need to go? Are bike paths and walkways well-lit? According to Washington State Highway Safety Coordinator, (Or whatever his title is, Mark?) John Moffat, Kirkland, Washington strives to be the safest community in the nation for pedestrians. Wide sidewalks, exceptionally good police protection of pedestrian rights, and well-signed crossings are just a start. Crosswalks in the town of 42,000 are outlined with airport landing strobes that blink at the push of a button, and many crossings are outfitted with racks of high-visibility orange flags that pedestrians carry across the street and redeposit in the rack on the other side. "Amazingly," says Moffat, "everyone stops--and right now!"

So what can YOU do?

Infrastructure helps, but safety begins by setting a good example: Drive more carefully, and always stop and wave pedestrians across at crosswalks. Volunteer to be a school crossing guard, (if not for the kids, then for the free coffee every morning!) ask neighbors to keep their dogs leashed or fenced, report poorly-lit areas or broken street lights to police and start a crime watch program in your neighborhood.

Take a walk around your neighborhood. If your community is lacking in any of these areas, don't be afraid to initiate change. If you don't do it, who will?

And The Winners Are....

Out of hundreds of nominations sent in by readers, we picked five small towns, five medium cities, and five large cities that passed our test of providing compact and diverse development, places to walk, no impassable barriers, beauty, and safety.

The winning communities are:

Small Communities (pop. <50,000)

1. Dunedin, FL

The Pinellas Trail bike path bisects the compact town center of Dunedin--the oldest city on Florida's south coast. Pocket parks, colorful and climate-appropriate landscaping, traditional streetlights and interesting architecture add to the town's beauty, while clearly-demarcated pedestrian crossings and 15 mile per hour speed limits make walking safe.

2. Exeter, NH

Compact downtown development with great window-shopping and historic buildings, miles of walking and hiking trails, easy pedestrian river crossings, and well-maintained sidewalks make Exeter exceptional. And according to our nominator Jean Jackson, the town will soon have a new walking path along the Squamscot River that will connect existing walkways.

3. Eureka Springs, AR

"The city that water built" has grown beyond its namesake springs, but the "Indian Healing Springs" and the parks that surround them remain the town's focal points. Both a Tree City USA and National Register of Historic Places in America town, Eureka Springs is an enchanting mix of natural and man-made beauty that provides residents and visitors with endless opportunities for safe, quiet walks. Nominator Cathy Cunningham suggests considering "a romantic stroll, a walking tour sponsored by the Preservation Society or hiking at historic 100-acre Lake Leatherwood with its four-mile hiking trail around the lake."

4. Burlington, VT

A walk through downtown is a step into the past as many original 18th and 19th century residences, churches, commercial and municipal buildings have been preserved in Burlington's many historic districts. Several blocks of the Church Street Historic District have been converted to a downtown pedestrian mall, and a 6.5 mile paved bicycle/walking path passes by parks, beaches, a campground, the revitalized downtown waterfront, and a wildlife refuge as it runs along the shoreline of Lake Champlain from one end of the city to the other. Side spurs lead off the trail to sites like the Ethan Allen Tower which gives stunning views of the lake. Burlingtonian, Jennifer Ely maintains that "it's the combination of the lake, the many historic sites, and friendly people--including LOTS of walkers--that makes Burlington such a wonderfully walkable city."

5. Xenia, OH

A small-town atmosphere offers pedestrians safety while miles of wide bicycle/pedestrian trails connect homes to parks, schools and shopping in a restored historical district.

Medium Cities (pop. 50,000 to 500,000)

1. Boulder, CO

The ultimate college town. An urban growth ring--preserved as parkland--ensures compact development and an ambitious Urban Open Lands Plan provides plenty of parkland within the ring. Downtown Boulder centers on the Pearl Street Pedestrian Mall, lined with cafes, retail shops and places to rent mountain bikes or rock-climbing gear.

2. Chattanooga, TN

General Sherman's victory here in 1863 was the starting point for his Long March to the Sea in which the city of Atlanta was burned to the ground, while part of the Cherokee Trail of Tears--route of the tribe's forced removal and subsequent death march to Oklahoma in 1838--lies just outside of town. The walking is a lot friendlier in Chattanooga these days. The redevelopment of the Tennessee Riverfront as it passes through downtown features miles of trails and paved paths, and several walking bridges span the river to connect destinations on either shore. According to Cindy Beale, who nominated her home town, Chatanoogans have taken advantage of the improvements, as the city was recently recognized by The Wellness Council of America for the healthy lifestyle improvements of its citizens.

3. Raleigh, NC

"The City of Oaks" is often described as "a park with a city in it," surrounded, as it is, with an abundance of trees, lakes and parks. 36 miles of greenway and 9,000 acres of parkland offer walkers ample opportunity to exercise amid natural beauty, while the area centered around the "pedestrianized" Capitol Square, and the four-block city market south of the capital, presents superb window shopping opportunities.

4. Portland, ME

Although the largest city in Maine, Portland is more like a sophisticated, attractive small town than a major urban center. David Willauer, Portland's Senior Transportation Planner says "Portland is ideal for walking because the dense, residential development makes for short distances to activity centers." The book and antique shops of the restored Old Port Exchange are easily navigated on foot, and the homes of the Eastern Promenade enjoy remarkable serenity for their proximity to downtown. Although the city was nearly burned to the ground three times in its history, there are still plenty of historic buildings for walkers to seek out and explore. The city is pedestrian-friendly to children as well, as nearly 60% of students walk to Portland's two urban elementary schools.

5. Austin, TX

A haven for artists, musicians and writers, the Capital City is one of the few places in Texas where walking shoes and bicycles are as commonplace as gas-guzzling behemoths. A great urban park system, miles of walking and hiking trails, and relative safety for a capital city make Austin a winner for walkers.

Large Cities (500,000+)

1. Washington DC

The District is blessed and burdened with all the best and worst of urban living. Fabulous museums and historic sites concentrated along the mall, great walkable neighborhoods like Georgetown and Adams Morgan, world-class public transportation, and miles of gorgeous bicycle paths along the restored C&O Canal and the Potomac River put Washington up there with the grandest cities of Europe. Of course Washington is also one of the nation's murder and crime capitals, but the monument- and museum-packed northeast quadrant of the city is relatively safe. The diagonal streets laid out by Pierre L'Enfant shorten distances between destinations, and create hundreds of triangular pocket parks where they intersect with the gridwork of north-south and east-west running streets.

2. Minneapolis, MN

Minneapolis is renowned for combining the best of urban life with the neighbors and quality of life found in smaller towns. Boasting one acre of parkland for every 57 residents, Minneapolis is also notable for its enclosed second-story skyways downtown and well-maintained walking paths around the city's many lakes that bustle with pedestrian activity year-round. According to Minneapolis resident, Missy Olive, "the walking paths are hopping from the wee hours of the morning to the late hours of evening throughout the summer and winter (yes, even with sub-zero wind chills)!"

3. Boston, MA

Walking Magazine didn't locate itself here for the baked beans: Boston is widely regarded as one of the most walkable cities in the world. Bean town's compact design is just the beginning: The city's famed historic sites are linked by the red brick-marked Freedom Trail running from Boston Common to the Bunker Hill Monument, ____ miles of pedestrian and bike paths along the Charles River carry thousands of walkers, joggers, bikers and roller bladers per day between downtown Boston and Cambridge--home of Harvard and MIT--while Frederic Law Olmstead's "Emerald Necklace" of inter-connected parks provides walkers with a place for quiet tree-lined jaunts. Outlying neighborhoods are accessed by the cheap and efficient subways and trolleys of the "T"--the oldest such public transportation system in the US.

4. Portland, OR

The "City of Roses" is known for sidewalks paved with famous quotes, small city blocks and a pedestrian-friendly city center dotted with small urban parks. An urban growth boundary ensures compact development, and a Neighborhood Traffic Management Program "improves neighborhood livability by mitigating the impact of vehicular traffic on residential neighborhoods."

5. Seattle/Kirkland, WA

Seattle and Kirkland are models of institutional pedestrian protection. In addition to Kirkland's safety features outlined above, pedestrians get the right of way at all crosswalks--a right that's strictly enforced by the police in both towns. Police also enforce pedestrian responsibilities: The Seattle police have written over 500,000 jaywalking tickets in the past 50 years. The result is one of the lowest per capita pedestrian death rates in the US. Seattle has led the nation in "traffic calming," with some 700 traffic circles and other devices installed over the past 20 years, and the bike paths in both communities are attractive, well-planned, and heavily used by walking and biking commuters.

If your community didn't win a Walkable Community Award, don't throw in the towel: Work in your own neighborhood to make your city more walkable, then be sure to nominate her next year!

Check out these Resources:

Safe Street Design and Traffic Calming:

AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety

1440 New York Avenue NW

Suite 201

Washington, DC 20005

Phone: 202/942-2050 Fax: 202/783-4788

Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety:

Federal Highway Administration Pedestrian and Bicycle Research Program HSR-20,

6300 Georgetown Pike

McLean, VA 22101

www.ohs.fhwa.dot.gov

The National Bicycle and Pedestrian Clearinghouse

1506 21st Street, NW

Suite 210

Washington, DC 20036

Phone: 800/760-NBPC or 202/463-8405

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Office of Occupant Protection Safety Countermeasures Division, NTS-23

400 7th Street, SW

Washington, DC 20590

Traffic Safety Programs - 202/366-139

State and Community Programs - 202/366-2121

The National Safety Council

1121 Spring Lake Drive

Itasca, IL 60143-3201

Phone: 708/285-1121

Fax: 708/285-1315

Pedestrian Program

U.S. Department of Transportation

Office of the Secretary, P-15

400 Seventh Street, S.W.

Washington, D.C. 20590 or FAX L. Boodlal, 202/366-7909

Safer, More Attractive Neighborhoods:

National Crime Prevention Council

1700 K Street NW, Second Floor

Washington, DC 20006-3817

202/466-6272 or www.ncpc.org

National Arbor Day Foundation

100 Arbor Avenue

Nebraska City, NE 68410

402/474-5655 or www.arborday.org

Walking and Health:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Division of Nutrition & Physical Activity

888/232-4674

Shape Up America!

6707 Democracy Blvd. Suite 107

Bethesda, Maryland 20817

suainfo@shapeup.org

Partnership for a Walkable America:

National Safety Council

1121 Spring Lake Drive

Itasca, IL 60143-3201

630/285-1121 or www.nsc.org/walkable.htm

Safest Routes to Schools Programs:

Contact your local AAA Club, or

National Safe Kids Campaign

1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Suite 1000

Washington, DC 20004-1707

202/662-0600

www.safekids.org

Walk a Child to School Programs:

Walking Magazine

9-11 Harcourt Street

Boston, MA 02116

800/266-3312

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