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Walkability is a hot item these days



Pedestrians on a sidewalk in Boise. The city of Boise is promoting alternate means of transportation, including walking and bicycling. Photo by Patrick Sweeney.

Walking has arrived on the national conscience.

Planning that encourages walking is a priority for the Boise City Council. It's addressed in every home listing on the Intermountain Multiple Listing Service. It's even a focus for the Ada County Highway District. It's entering the mainstream.

"My spell checker rejected it two years ago," said Bryant Forrester, president of Urban Concepts, a sales and marketing firm for high-density Smart Growth properties in Boise.

Walkability is a measure of how friendly an area is to walking, including sidewalk conditions, crosswalks and pedestrian signals, on-street parking, trees, shop windows, transit and speed limits for cars.

Boise has been improving walkability every year since 2010. [Ninety-two new miles of sidewalk](#) have been built in Ada County since 2010. New stretches of widened sidewalks with new mid-block, signalized crosswalks have graced downtown Boise in the same time frame.

As the city of Boise sought private-sector proposals to draft a transportation action plan earlier this year, the request acknowledged "many areas of the community have incomplete sidewalk systems."

"We want to make the car one of many transportation choices, not the primary one," Boise Mayor Dave Bieter wrote in the RFP.

Though mankind walked for about the first 2 million years, nearly all transportation priorities shifted to motorized travel after World War II.

Walking's slow comeback began with the federal Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991, commonly known as ISTEA (pronounced ice tea). It pointed to walking and bicycling as modes of transport, said Stefani Seskin, deputy director, National Complete Streets Coalition at Smart Growth America.

But it took a while for walkability to go mainstream. Geoff Anderson, the CEO of Smart Growth America, a national coalition that promotes building communities with housing and transportation near jobs, shops and schools, said it was a "fringe topic" in the mid-1990's.

"I feel around 2002 conversation started to get out in the public," he said. "Walk Score in 2007 is a good indicator. Jobs started moving back downtown in 2007."

Walkability is also linked to economic development and to public health.

"People are starting to see we have built this environment that is not conducive to health," Diane Kushlan, district council coordinator at the Urban Land Institute Idaho, which espouses responsible land use and creating and sustaining thriving communities.

Smart Growth America has determined that 737 government agencies in the United States had walkability policies at the end of 2014, a contrast to 65 in 2007 and only 17 in 2003.

Boise has a way to go

CCDC in 2013 commissioned city planner Jeff Speck, author of "Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time" to [analyze the walkability](#) of downtown Boise. He reported back that downtown Boise is "considerably more walkable than the typical mid-sized American city center."

"Most of it, however, still lacks the lively around-the-clock vitality that can be found in those downtowns that are known for their walkability, like Portland and Boulder, cities with a more favorable jobs/housing balance and considerably safer-feeling streets (because of slower moving vehicles)," he said in his report.

Speck recommended converting several one-way streets to two-way; reducing speed limits; and moving the transit center so that it does not hinder commercial activity. Speck approves of the collaboration between Valley Regional Transit and Gardner Co. to place the downtown transit center under the City Center Plaza office structure now under construction.

Cynthia Gibson, executive director of the Idaho Walk Bike Alliance, believes walking crosses many societal needs.

"Walking is important because it is such an easy solution to our complicated transportation problems. If we build communities for more walking (and biking), we could reduce our burden of needing more expensive roads, reduce health care costs, enjoy each other more, and live better lives."

Walk Score

Walk Score, a private company founded in 2007, assigns a number from 1 to 100 to cities, neighborhoods, even individual addresses, based on an algorithm that incorporates walking routes, depth of choice, pedestrian friendliness, population and neighborhood data. The company was formed to help people find a walkable place to live, Walk Score CEO Josh Herst said on the company website. The Intermountain Multiple Listing Service, which

is owned by the Ada County



Matt Edmond

Association of Realtors, has listed the Walk Score of [each home listing](#) since 2011.

The MLS presents homes between eastern Oregon and Twin Falls. "People are asking for it. It's not huge but it's getting more and more popular," said Brenda Kolsen, president of the ACAR board. "We're having more people ask to be closer to services." Boise as a whole has a relatively low Walk Score of 37, which is defined as "car dependent – most errands require a car." Downtown Boise, however, has a Walk Score of 80, which is "very walkable." The North End follows with a Walk Score of 59 as does the West End between 17th Street and Veterans Park. Morris Hill follows at 58, the Central Bench at 56 and South Boise Village at 55 – all falling in the "somewhat walkable" category.

Even as much as planners and academicians latch onto Walk Score, some believe there is more to walkability than being close to shops and entertainment. A true Walk Score should include more details of sidewalk conditions, the speed and volume of traffic, and other factors, said Matt Edmond, project manager of capital improvements at the Capital City Development Corp., downtown Boise's redevelopment agency. "Walk Score relies primarily on an assessment of the proximity of various amenities and services (dining, groceries, shopping, parks, schools, etc.) to a given address," Edmond said.

Sidewalks as selling points

Real Capital Analytics, a New York City provider of commercial property data and analytics, this year teamed up with Walk Score to launch Commercial Property Price Indices to quantify the price value of walkability for commercial properties. Their research has determined that commercial property values in highly walkable central business districts nationwide have increased 125 percent in the past 10 years. Also highly walkable suburban properties have

increased 43 percent while somewhat walkable or car-dependent suburban properties have only gone up 21 percent. Downtown Boise commercial properties, however, have only risen about 15 percent over 10 years, according to Angie Emmons, market research analyst at Thornton Oliver Keller Commercial Real Estate. That tallies with what LeAnn Hume has observed.

"So far, walkability has not become part of the conversation in the Treasure Valley retail market," said Hume, a principal at Cushman & Wakefield. "As downtown Boise matures, I am sure that walkability will be scrutinized as part of retail tenant criteria and is probably already part of the criteria in dense urban markets with high street retail. The Treasure Valley tends to trail behind the larger markets for trends and as it stands today, tenants still prefer ample parking over walkability, even in downtown. "But walkability is a factor that comes into play for Wes Jost, senior vice president for commercial real estate in Idaho at Zions Bank.

"I think walkability is important for people who want to live downtown and have access to commerce, employment and recreation," Jost said. "It deals with marketability and absorption. If you can walk to Trader Joe's and BoDo, you will have a greater set of folks interested in renting."

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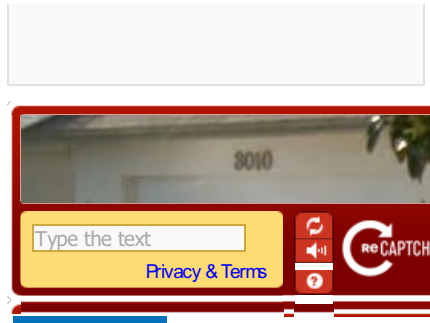
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