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A step-by-step approach to welcoming walkers



Cynthia Gibson, Executive Director of Idaho Walk Bike Alliance, measures sidewalks in Boise. Photo by Patrick Sweeney.

As executive director of the Idaho Walk Bike Alliance, Cynthia Gibson knows a thing or two about sidewalks.

Gibson believes walkability is critical to a city's health and economic vibrancy because, she said, people shop more on foot, connect with one another, and the streets are safer with more pedestrians on them. In her job, she conducts walk audits, walking meetings, legislative walk bike lunches, and evangelizes on the simplicity of walking and bicycling as alternatives to motorized travel. She said public officials play a critical role in getting regular people out of their cars and onto their feet.

"Until you really decide to make walkability a priority, it's not going to happen," Gibson said recently as she stretched her 16-foot tape measure across the 10th Street sidewalk. "If you want walkability, it has to be integrated in your policies."

The Capital City Development Corp. has a [Downtown Boise Streetscape Standards & Specifications Manual](#) that precisely describes the sidewalk expectations between Broadway and 16th Street and between River Street and Jefferson/State/Washington streets. CCDC has been applying those standards to downtown sidewalks since the manual came out in 2009. The goal is to make sidewalks as wide as the right-of-way will allow.

"Twenty-two feet," Gibson announced for the width of 10th Street.

That, of course, also includes zones for trees,

benches, bike racks and other “furnishings” and the potential for sidewalk dining. Still, the pedestrian surface far exceeds Federal Highway Administration minimum standards of 5 feet wide. Many downtown Boise sidewalks measure in excess of 14 feet.

CCDC built the stretch of 10th Street sidewalk on the west side of the street between Idaho and Bannock streets in 2012 to meet its “urban concrete with brick” standards. Parking was eliminated on that side of the street to make way for the wider sidewalk, said Matt Edmond, CCDC’s project manager of capital improvements.

“They did a really good job on 10th Street with a five-foot bike lane, bike parking, split ramps for wheelchairs,” Gibson said.

Working with the city of Boise and the Ada County Highway District, CCDC is following the recommendations of city planner Jeff Speck, author of “Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time.” Speck analyzed the walkability of downtown Boise in 2013.

Among his 10 recommendations for downtown Boise, Speck called for reducing speed limits to 25 mph in the area bounded by Boise State University, Washington Street, 13th Street, and Third Street. He urged Boise to convert downtown streets to two-way except for the Front and Myrtle, Capitol and Ninth, and Idaho and Main couplets, which he grudgingly would allow to remain one-way because of their heavy traffic counts.

Speck says one-way streets reduce pedestrian comfort and business vitality.

“Whether they know it or not, most pedestrians understand in their bones that a person hit by a car traveling at 35 mph is 10 times as likely to die than if the car is traveling at 25 mph,” Speck wrote in the Boise report. “Drivers tend to speed on multiple-lane one-way.”

The business impact of welcoming walkers

CCDC built the Bannock sidewalk along the Banner Bank building in 2010 with a 17-foot-wide sidewalk, and the 14.5-foot sidewalk across Bannock from Ninth to just past 10th Street followed in 2012.

CCDC seeks to achieve walkability with attention to lane widths, the number of street lanes, bike lanes, and continuous shade trees.

“Walkability is about making a pleasant environment all around for people and it goes well beyond the sidewalks to the adjacent streets and properties,” Edmond said. “We always endeavor to get as much space for pedestrians as possible through narrowing lanes where ACHD will allow. “Generally, we try to make sidewalks wide enough to include patio dining.”

As much as ACHD is about roads, pedestrian amenities play large at the district.

ACHD has installed 16 rectangular rapid flashing

beacons at crosswalks in the past three years, such as the one on River Street at the Boise Public Library. A study in St. Petersburg, Fla., revealed that the average motorist yielding compliance rate improved from less than 1 percent at crosswalks with no lights to 82 at crosswalks with pedestrian signage accompanied by flashing lights.

ACHD in 2011 also added pedestrian crossing signals on Capitol Boulevard at Broad Street and at Grove Street and in 2013 a third one at Ninth and Grove streets.

Beyond downtown Boise, ACHD has undertaken dozens of sidewalk projects, amounting to 92 miles of new sidewalks in southeast, central, north/northwest and southwest Boise, along with Meridian, Eagle and Kuna. The district presently is building sidewalks on Mountain View from Cole to Ustick.

Gibson bikes and walks from her North End home to take care of most her needs.

"I've lived there 24 years," she said. "Prior to that, I lived in D.C. where I walked, biked, or took transit everywhere."

The member-funded Idaho Walk Bike alliance she heads promotes active transportation as safe, healthy and reliable. The alliance also gets donations and does fundraising activities.

To Gibson, Bannock between Ninth and 11th streets is a future hot spot for pedestrians. The Boise Plaza parking lot fills a city block between 10th and 11th. There is a mid-block "missing tooth" that serves as a dirt parking lot. Next door is the Banner Bank building, the first LEED platinum certified building in Idaho for its energy-saving elements. Banner Bank scores points because "it has windows on the street level," which is welcoming to pedestrians, in contrast to forbidding blank walls, Gibson said.

Now Gibson would like to see more people on the sidewalks.

"Bannock doesn't get used a lot," Gibson said while measuring off 15-foot-wide sidewalks. "I like Bannock. It has one lane of traffic each way and it's a two-way street. It has a five-and-a-half-foot bike lane, an 11-foot car lane. There is on-street parking that serves as a buffer (for pedestrians). There are some bike racks. There are places to go. You can walk to the Y, to the post office, places for lunch."

She will get her wish if a developer builds a Hyatt Place hotel in the Boise Plaza parking lot, as proposed in June.

"Seriously, with out-of-town visitors staying there, that will liven up that part of downtown and the importance of walking will greatly increase," Gibson said. "Plus, people visiting Boise will see it as a hip town that invites people to shop and dine at a leisurely pace."

The Village at Meridian has achieved walkability

Though it sits at the the busiest intersection in Idaho, The Village at Meridian is a place

where walking is popular. The inviting 58-acre Julius M. Kleiner Memorial Park opened next door in 2012, one year ahead of The Village. Though the Village at Meridian has no residential component, the Village has emerged as a walker’s destination for the nearly 3,000 people who live within 1 mile of the lifestyle center.

“A whole slew of consumers from the subdivisions walk to it,” said Brenda Kolsen, president of the Ada County Association of Realtors, whose Intermountain Multiple Listing Services provides the Walk Score figure for every home listing. The Village at Meridian confirms people walk through Kleiner Park at the northeast edge of The Village to get to the village. They also walk from many nearby developments, including Red Feather and the Regency at River Valley apartments, and Heritage Grove, which boasts on its website that it is “a short walk from Meridian’s finest shopping, dining and entertainment destination.”

Walkers from nearby neighborhoods who were using the park as a route to The Village were part of the early development conversations, said Ramona Merrill, regional marketing director at The Village at Meridian. “It’s absolutely a walking destination,” Merrill said. “In addition to the apartment complex at River Valley, there are big subdivisions all around us to the north and east. We see families and groups walking all the time.”

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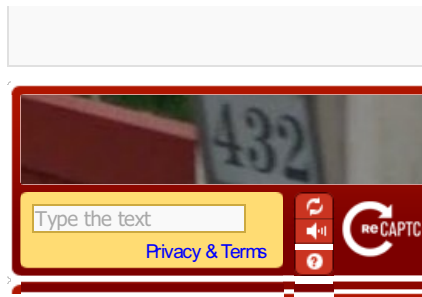
ABOUT TEYA VITU



Teya Vitu is an Idaho Business Review reporter, covering commercial real estate, construction, transportation and whatever else may intrigue him in the moment.


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