Community Assets of Walkability

Towns that invest in public space improvements to create attractive and walkable environments reap a variety of community benefits. Whether by converting an old railroad corridor into a rail-trail, developing a greenway along a riverfront, designing streets in a grid-like network, increasing the pedestrian-friendliness of the central business district, or encouraging mixed-use redevelopment, there are many ways for a town to improve its walkability and enjoy a big return on investment. Some gains are more obvious than others, and often people are only aware of the recreational benefit of a pedestrian facility, such as a trail or greenway (“Rails-to-Trails”). However, many strategies and tactics that improve the walkability of a town also contribute to the town’s character and economic vitality. When people live in an environment where infrastructure fosters a pedestrian environment and walking to residential, business, and retail areas is convenient and attractive, the community builds a distinct identity and competitive advantage. Understanding the extensive nature of walkability assets, especially economic benefits, helps justify the dedication of a larger allocation of transportation funds to walking (Litman, 10). Many municipalities are realizing that public investment can spur private investment and development. The concept of a “trail town” showcases how small town centers of commerce for bikers, hikers, tourists, and residents have created a positive economic impact in western Pennsylvania.

Varied Benefits

The varied benefits to the community from walkability can be broken down into essentially three categories: protected environmental resources, greater livability, and economic gains. Within each category, several kinds of benefits illustrate the return from investing in walkability. It is important to keep in mind that although divided thus, each benefit is linked to all others in a sort of web, and to explain one benefit is to touch upon the rest.

Protected Environmental Resources

Perhaps the most visible benefit is the protection of environmental resources, which can be seen in open spaces for recreation, a more attractive cityscape or downtown area, and in the harmony between nature and humans.

The recreational opportunities created from walkability practices are clear and most acknowledged. For example, a trail system established on preserved open space attracts residents to play and exercise (“Virginia Greenways,” 12). When the environment is protected and made accessible for pedestrians and bicyclists, the community benefits from a natural recreation facility.
A community that is a good steward of the environment will benefit from a more natural and, therefore, more attractive cityscape. Planting trees along sidewalks and downtown, or keeping natural buffers between pedestrians and cars, enhances the aesthetics of a town.

Towns that place a priority on designing and implementing walkable infrastructure have natural harmony and control human impact on the environment. For instance, mixed-use developments enable residents to eliminate long, stressful drive times and enjoy decreased gas consumption because workplaces, homes, and services are close together. Communities are also realizing that infill development, building where there is existing infrastructure, is less costly than extending a town’s infrastructure (e.g., roads, sewers, and utilities) into fringe areas. These smart growth practices, which reduce sprawl and direct development to growth-designated areas, preserve open space, reduce traffic congestion, and protect the environment. Another environmentally friendly practice is connecting trails and greenways to create “linear greenspaces” that “preserve important natural landscapes, provide needed links between fragmented habitats, and offer tremendous opportunities for protecting plant and animal species” (“Rails-to-Trails”). In addition to a cleaner and preserved environment, walkability practices can also protect against costly natural disasters. Flood control can be maintained by leaving the flooding fringe of a river undeveloped and delineated by a greenway (“Virginia Greenways,” 11).

**Greater Livability**

Livability is the quality of life experienced by a member of a community and affected by a sense of belonging to a unique town, one’s health condition, and chances to enjoy public amenities. Walkability improvements play a key role in place-making, which is creating a sense of community identity and unity. Pro-pedestrian policies can provide access to and links between historical sites, which can enhance a town’s unique character and build stronger, more vibrant communities (“Rail-to-Trails”). Designing unique structures that are compatible with the character of a community (e.g., streetscapes, park facilities and trails, and public spaces) can be a source of pride and distinctiveness. For example, a historic rail station or town square may be revitalized to create a tangible link to a town’s history, yet also be designed to meet the mobility and transportation needs of both residents and visitors. Contributing to community unity is interaction between neighbors, something that occurs far less often in auto-dependent communities (Litman, 5). High pedestrian activity on streets—“vigilance,” so to speak—also is an important factor in decreasing criminal activity, which is detrimental to any community’s sense of place and unity.

Because suburbs have been designed with an orientation toward cars and fewer opportunities to walk, obesity has been on the rise. Obesity is associated with many health problems such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, arthritis, depression, and some types of cancer. Obesity is the result of a sedentary lifestyle, and it can be overcome with adequate physical activity. Walking is a great way to maintain the level of recommended daily physical activity of thirty minutes and does not require any special talents (“Overweight and Obesity”). Communities that plan
attractive, safe, and well-maintained, pedestrian-oriented infrastructure can foster social, civic, and physical activity. Another related aspect of healthy living that communities may consider when planning is providing access to healthy foods. Jurisdictions may designate open space for community gardens. Zoning regulations should allow access to healthy-food retailers (e.g., supermarkets, produce vendors, and farmers’ markets).

As a mode of transportation, walking helps provide transportation equity within a community. Pedestrian-oriented facilities and transportation provides accessibility and mobility to zero-car populations or individuals who do not own or who lack access to automobiles (Litman, 7). Walkable infrastructure should be planned and designed to be barrier-free and accommodate persons of all ages and abilities. The concept of universal design once focused on providing equal access to those with disabilities. In recent years, this concept is being applied to the design of places and products that are usable by and desirable to a broad range of people, including people with disabilities and other often overlooked groups. The illustration below

**Pedestrian Facility Elements**

depicts pedestrian facility elements to enhance walkability of a community and the concept of universal design.

**Economic Benefits of Walkability**

There is a clear connection between walkable environments and the economic viability of a town. Designing neighborhoods, downtown streetscapes, recreation facilities, trails, and shared-use paths so they are pedestrian-friendly can be a good investment. Walkable design can help revitalize central business districts, increase private investment, lead to higher property values, promote tourism, and support the development of a good business climate.

Because businesses recognize that shoppers value a positive pedestrian experience when shopping, commercial activity gravitates toward walkable places. Hence, walkability improvements (e.g., visually attractive streetscapes, interesting light fixtures, and traffic-calming measures) on a town’s “Main Street” can jolt economic development (Litman, 6). Towns that have gathering places at the heart of their community can provide functional open space as well as create visual appeal. In addition, design elements of a downtown—the streetscape, style of buildings, sidewalk pavers, signs, and infrastructure—contribute to a town’s character and historic preservation. Walkable communities attract smaller, decentralized businesses that are characteristic of the new economy. These knowledge-driven, service-oriented “new economy” firms seek downtown business locations that promote social interaction, accessibility, and networking (Local Government Commission, 2).

There is a growing demand for properties in walkable communities. Residential and commercial property owners seek convenience and mobility opportunities of pedestrian-friendly developments versus grid-locked, auto-dependent areas (“Economic Benefits”). Property values are often higher in walkable communities. A study by the Urban Land Institute determined that homebuyers were more willing to pay a premium price for homes in pedestrian-friendly communities that featured interconnected, narrow streets with sidewalks, development with a mix of land uses, tree-lined streets, short front yard set-backs, and rear garages accessed by alleys. Another study found that reducing traffic noise, traffic speeds, and vehicle-generated air pollution greatly increased property values in residential areas (Local Government Commission, 1).

In addition, walkable communities that are more compact and dense generally have a lower tax burden than development in more remote areas of a community. It is more cost-effective for a local government to direct investment to areas where growth or redevelopment is desired rather than use taxpayer dollars for new infrastructure. According to the Smart Growth Network, strategic public investments can deliver multiple benefits such as “new or renovated buildings, new amenities, an increased tax base, and a lively downtown to attract visitors and residents” (Smart Growth Network, 9).
Walkable towns are an enticement for tourism. “Communities and their downtowns that are walkable are capturing a greater share of tourist dollars…” (“Economic Benefits”). Visitors are also interested in eco-, heritage-, recreation-, and trail-based tourism; walkability practices can support all these interests. Once tourists come, they spend their money on related commodities such as meals, public transit, lodging, and souvenirs (“Virginia Greenways”). Walking saves travelers money otherwise spent on vehicular travel; saved money is available for spending that stimulates the local economy (Litman, 6). Economic development strategies can be built from the tourism industry and serve both the needs of the business community and visitors.

**Trail Towns**

The Trail Town Program is an example of an economic development initiative along the Great Allegheny Passage, a 150-mile rail-turned-trail connecting Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to Cumberland, Maryland. The Trail Town concept was developed by the Allegheny Trail Alliance (ATA), a coalition of seven trail organizations in southwestern Pennsylvania and western Maryland to realize the economic potential of the Great Allegheny Passage. Together with the Progress Fund, which now operates the Trail Town Program, ATA envisioned the Trail Town Program as “a corridor of revitalized trailside communities along the Great Allegheny Passage that reap the economic benefits of trail-based tourism and recreation as part of a larger, coordinated approach to regional economic development” (“Who We Are”). The goals of the program are to:

- Retain existing businesses.
- Expand and increase revenues of existing businesses.
- Recruit sustainable businesses.
- Adopt the Trail Town vision and integrate its concept of a visitor-friendly environment in community planning.

Trail Towns connect trails and towns along the Great Alleghany Passage. The Trail Town Program serves as an engine for economic development by capitalizing on the trail user market and marketing small towns as centers of commerce and tourism. These towns provide direct access to the trail system and essential services that rail users and tourists need such as shops, restaurants, and lodging. A trail town has an exceptional opportunity to revitalize its central commercial district by implementing the “Main Street Approach” program developed by The National Main Street Center (“Trail Towns,” 7). Trail users will find the community accommodating, hospitable, and with a “trail-friendly” personality (“Trail Towns,” 6). This is to say that the trail becomes an integral part of the town’s sense of identity. A town, therefore, can gain big economically and create a greater sense of place from trail-oriented improvements.