

REALTORS® & Smart Growth

# on common ground

SPRING 2021

# The 15-Minute City

**AMENITIES WITHIN A WALK  
ENABLING DENSITY  
ACCESS TO OPEN SPACES**



NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION OF  
REALTORS®

# Everything Close to Home

Walkable communities are not a new idea. Until a 100 years ago, that is how our towns and cities developed. The development of these communities was an organic process that took place out of necessity, for there were no other options for getting around to get one's daily bread or buy a pair of shoes.

Then the automobile came into mass production and the pendulum started to swing. The National Interstate and Defense Highway Act of 1956 kicked things into high gear and the car became king and people spread out.

Fast forward to the present and the pendulum seems to be swinging back. In the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® 2020 Community & Transportation Preferences Survey, half of respondents indicated that they would prefer to live in a walkable community. The polling, conducted in February and August, revealed that this preference held true immediately before the pandemic, as well as five months into it, though millennials with children did show an increased interest in moving to a more suburban location.

Sometimes, a new angle on an old idea breathes new life into a concept. Enter the 15-minute neighborhood, a place where residents can access everything they need within a 15-minute walk of their residence. From a smart growth point of view, the concept of the 15-minute neighborhood seems like a worthy aspiration. Getting there will be a journey of retooling the built environment to create a range of housing options at a range of price points and retail, service and office options all within close proximity. How do we get there?



This edition of **On Common Ground** explores the various components of the 15-minute city mentioned above, such as zoning changes that will be necessary to produce the housing that is needed, as well as the connectivity of transportation and the importance of nearby green space for the inhabitants.

The concept also dovetails well with the increasing number of seniors for whom walking is good and driving can be problematic and have a growing interest in aging in place. Another trend that plays nicely into the creation of the 15-minute neighborhood is the repurposing of shopping malls into mixed-use facilities. Add in the possible conversion of some office buildings to residential and retail, following the pandemic-induced reduction in demand for office space, and there is an opportunity for a greater mix of uses within proximity.

The evolution of a community into a 15-minute neighborhood may take a decade or two, but the virtues of heading in that direction seem worth the effort of setting course in that direction.

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# On Common Ground

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**Back Cover:** Thank you to the Center for Planning Excellence (CPEX). Jeannette Dubinin, director of Resilience and Adaptation for CPEX, created the 20-minute bingo card to help everyday people identify shopping, health services, schools and daily conveniences within a safe, 20-minute walk.



# THE 15-MINUTE CITY:

OLD-FASHIONED  
COMPACT, CONVENIENT,  
MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT  
FOR A MODERN, POST-PANDEMIC,  
WALKABLE WORLD



Paris, the 15-minute city illustration by Micael Fresque

By Steve Wright

The 15-minute city harkens back to an era when the predominant mode of travel was by foot and people could meet most of their needs within a 15-minute walk of their residence.

The concept, introduced by Colombian-French scientist Carlos Moreno and being rapidly implemented by Socialist Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo, has taken root in many urban areas around the world — including the United States.

In rapidly growing and urbanizing Charlotte, N.C., it's the 10-minute neighborhood. In Louisiana, with more small and medium cities spread out and developed to suburban standards, the goal is the 20-minute neighborhood.

Whether the goal is focused on increasing a mix of uses and amenities citywide or in key neighborhoods, the

15-minute concept emphasizes meeting all needs on foot, via bicycle or by using public transit.

Because areas that are amenity-, activity- and transit-rich tend to become very expensive to live and work in, many cities are grappling with how they can ensure equity, inclusion and accessibility in these economically powerful zones. (See “Inclusion, Equity And Accessibility — Ensuring The 15-Minute City Serves All” article on page 18.)

The 15-minute concept emphasizes meeting all needs on foot, via bicycle or by using public transit.

For decades, smart growth policy, the movement of New Urbanism and other policies have tried to steer cities away from the high cost of sprawl and car ownership. The pandemic has accelerated the trend toward creating more pedestrian and bike space, ensuring each neighborhood has open/park/recreation space and greening streetscapes and more to create a healthier environment that fights obesity and other diseases contributed to by car-dominated lifestyles.

The rapid response needed to cope with COVID-19 has given many urban cores the opportunity to quickly convert traffic lanes into pedestrian-bike space. To cope with social distancing while preserving main street businesses, the transformation has often been at a warp-speed pace — compared to the usual array of public hearings and months of review by myriad agencies.

“Using only paint and screw-in markers, nearly 100 miles of Parisian roads were temporarily reallocated to cyclists in the early months of the pandemic — a revolution in urban reprogramming. It was later announced that the changes would become permanent,” wrote Carlo Ratti, co-founder of the international design and innovation office Associati and director of the Senseable City Lab at MIT, and Richard Florida, professor at the University of Toronto’s School of Cities and Rotman School of Management in Project Syndicate.

Moreno, father of the 15-minute city and Hidalgo’s special envoy for smart cities, is scientific director and professor

specializing in complex systems and innovation at Paris - Panthéon Sorbonne University.

“Cities should be designed or redesigned so that within the distance of a 15-minute walk or bike ride, people should be able to live the essence of what constitutes the urban experience: to access work, housing, food, health, education, culture and leisure,” he said in an exclusive interview.

Moreno has four guiding principles of the 15-minute city:

1. Ecology: for a green and sustainable city.
2. Proximity: to live with reduced distance to other activities.
3. Solidarity: to create links between people.
4. Participation: actively involve citizens in the transformation of their neighborhood.

“This is in the tradition of Jane Jacobs,” Moreno said of the legendary urban activist-author who published “The Death and Life of Great American Cities” in 1961. “She developed this idea for livable cities — very vibrant, with green public space, social uses, different activities. The internet, technology and economic system is very, very different than her times, but this is still relevant today.”

Moreno said people are living in hard times of a pandemic, job loss, income disparity, long commutes and other pressures. He said making cities more livable is the medicine for urban ills.



Photo by Steve Wright



Photo by Mathieu Delmestre

*Biking and walking along the Seine in Paris has been extended with pedestrian paths replacing traffic.*

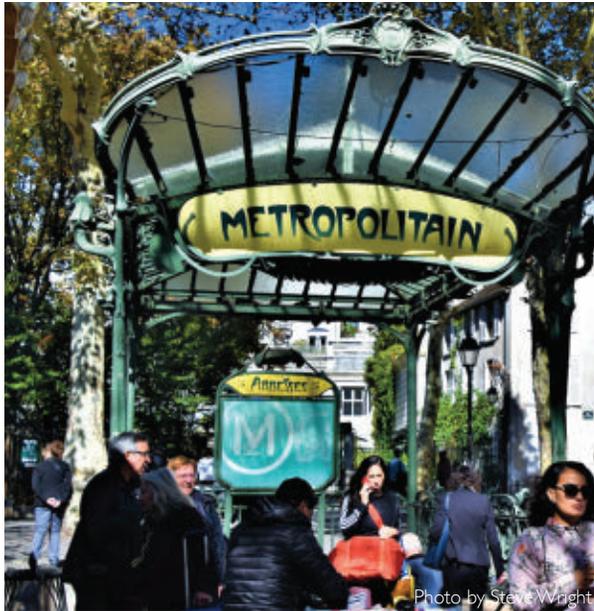


Photo by Steve Wright

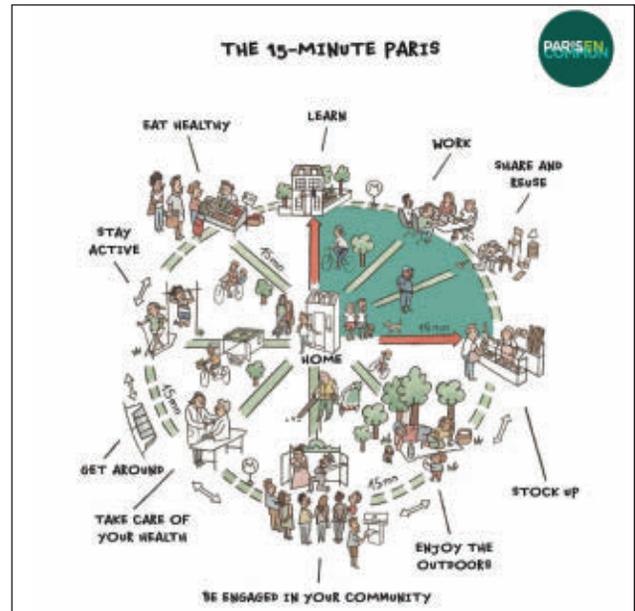


Illustration by Micael Fresque

“I call this the new happy life, the happy city. It also is healthier because of a low-carbon impact,” he said.

While Paris, which developed long before the car was the primary means of transportation, already is a 15-minute city to a large degree — Moreno points out that it still benefits from turning parking lots into greenery, making traffic circles pedestrian and bike friendly, and decentralizing the city. That means more medical centers spread through the neighborhoods and affordable housing introduced into wealthy neighborhoods, so support workers don’t have to live far outside the center.

Moreno acknowledges that increasing the livability of a big city can add to housing woes. This is particularly true in Paris — where a one-bedroom, 600-square-foot apartment in the 11th arrondissement relatively far from the Notre Dame, the Louvre and Eiffel tower, still costs more than \$1,000 per square foot.

He said Paris has committed to creating much more social housing, to allow people to age in place, to combat gentrification and to create rental properties for low-income workers. He said government also must take an active role in preserving mom and pop commerce, the low-rise

density of the Haussmann architectural style, six-story city and the human scale of Paris.

Moreno said connectivity to the suburbs (which are much denser than those in America) will be boosted by Grand Paris Express, a \$25-billion expansion of the century-old Paris Métro to be completed in 2030, and the system will have gained four lines, 68 stations, and more than 120 miles of track. Moreno noted that the lines will boost inclusion for people with disabilities, as all stations will be wheelchair-accessible. (Currently, only three percent of the historic metro is accessible.)

Anthony Breach, senior analyst at the UK-based Centre for Cities, has some concerns that the 15-minute city is unrealistic in terms of thinking there ever can be enough affordable urban core housing for the millions of people working hard at jobs that don’t pay well.

A 15-minute city means more medical centers spread through the neighborhoods and more affordable housing.

## Charlotte is focusing on the 10-minute neighborhood.

“People live in suburbs not because they are stupid, but because of cheaper space outside the city center. If you force them to own within 15 minutes of where they work, they are priced out,” he said. “If you discourage commuting from farther out, their economic opportunity is cut off.”

Breach said he is skeptical that urban planning alone can produce equity. He said not all good jobs can be available to all people within a 15-minute walk or bike ride. Breach said if car congestion and pollution is the problem, vehicles and driving could be taxed at a higher rate and transit could be expanded by making it more profitable — via land development rights around stations.

Charlotte, N.C., consistently one of the fastest-growing cities in the United States, is creating the 2040 Vision Plan — a comprehensive approach to land use, transit, diversity, equity and dozens of issues related to a city of nearly 900,000 that is predicted to swell in population by upwards of 400,000 residents in the next two decades.

Taiwo Jaiyeoba, assistant city manager and director of Planning, Design and Development, said Charlotte is focusing on the 10-minute neighborhood.

“We’ve got right now a zoning code that is 1,000 pages. We want to reduce that number, so you can read the comprehensive plan and understand [the focus on] creating 10-minute neighborhoods,” he said. Some will have less density, some higher density — but regardless of where you are, you will be able to walk to different things such as childcare, schools, healthcare, jobs, services that meet daily needs.”

Jaiyeoba said there are parts of the city focused on innovation, health care and manufacturing that need more housing developed close to them. It’s a move away from 20th century planning where residential was separated from commerce and job centers.

Charlotte’s CANOPY REALTOR® Association is working with city staff and elected officials to help guide the 2040 plan. CANOPY, which is working with several Charlotte builder and commercial REALTOR® groups, has stated “while we support many of the concepts being proposed, we are concerned about the costs and the impact of unintended consequences.”



Charlotte's 2040 Vision Plan



CPEX's Better Block Demonstration at the Perkins Overpass in Baton Rouge, La.



CPEX's 20-minute bingo card.

CANOPY President David Kennedy, a property manager at T.R. Lawing Realty, said the 10-minute neighborhood concept could be helped greatly by reprogramming retail space. “Retail, already hurting because you can get everything delivered, has taken a hit from the pandemic,” he said. “I think this is an opportunity for commercial brokers to turn a lot of retail space into mixed-use with multifamily housing. A lot of affordable, workforce housing could be built on the footprint of vacant retail. You just need to be creative and mindful of not clustering affordable housing. You want to mix in affordable with market rate, so everyone benefits.”

Jaiyeoba said the city is fortunate to have 19 miles of light rail, where people can commute without owning a car. About half the corridor has good connectivity to stations, but more can be done with trails and sidewalks to improve transit access for all.

“We must calibrate our sidewalks to make sure they are not only wide enough to accommodate people who use wheelchairs, but complete — as in they don’t stop short of the destination,” he said. “You cannot have a series of 10-minute

CPEX teamed with REALTOR® groups throughout the state to do better block demonstrations.

neighborhoods and promote walkability, if there are obstructions in the sidewalk or there are gaps in the sidewalk.

“We have more than 10,000 people who are visually challenged. If they have to cross six or eight lanes of traffic, think how difficult and dangerous that is. You have to think of pedestrian safety, of connectivity for those who use a wheelchair for mobility, for those who do not have access to a vehicle — that is who you design your city for.”

Jaiyeoba said the city’s 2040 plan is founded on an Equitable Growth Framework.

“Like many American cities, Charlotte was not immune to redlining and segregation by zoning laws,” he said. “Our current makeup as a city is defined by this very thing. We refer to it as the crescent [arc] and the wedge. The wedge [South Charlotte] is where the predominantly white population lives.”

That area has the best schools, well-designed neighborhoods, plus the best-paying and highest number of jobs outside of Uptown Charlotte.

“The arc is where most black, brown and low-income communities live. It has the lowest life expectancy, lots of industrial uses and [least amount of] tree canopy,” he said, noting the 2040 plan has built-in metrics to measure the achievement of equitable growth. “One of the plan goals is achieving housing diversity through Charlotte, which means rezoning the city to allow different



Examples of Better Block demonstrations, courtesy of AARP's Pop-Up Toolkit



forms of housing everywhere including in the wedge. This means duplexes, triplexes and townhouses. While that would help achieve affordable housing goals, it also helps to undo the legacy of segregation.”

In Louisiana — where few parishes had master plans before Katrina, few cities developed in a compact pattern and there is virtually no fixed transit — the goal is the 20-minute neighborhood. The Center for Planning Excellence (CPEX), Louisiana’s only nonprofit planning organization, is leading the statewide effort to promote a higher quality of life through smarter decisions in the built environment.

CPEX has partnered with the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® (NAR) for about 15 years — when Katrina rebuilding launched. During the NAR annual convention in New Orleans, some demonstration block improvements were done to spruce up neighborhoods and set an example of the value of walkability.

“We have teamed with REALTOR® groups throughout the state to do better block demonstrations — transforming spaces to be more bike-friendly, more pedestrian-accessible,” said Camille Manning-Broome, president & CEO of CPEX. “In Mid-City Baton Rouge, this led to a \$13-million road diet.”

Jeannette Dubinin, director of Resilience and Adaptation for CPEX, created the 20-minute bingo card to help everyday people identify shopping, health services, schools and daily conveniences within a safe, 20-minute walk.

“We are always trying to have education and awareness around the good, bad and ugly around the built environment,” she said. “[Bingo cards] give families a chance to go out and evaluate on their own what kind of assets can they get to and not get to in 20 minutes. The pandemic highlighted the ability to do anything within 20 minutes. We landed on 20 minutes because we are a suburban community, like most of America.”

Manning-Broome and Dubinin both noted that COVID-19’s silver lining was the move toward healthy activity. “Bike sales were going up like crazy. Restaurants were taking over parking spaces and bringing tables outside,” Manning-Broome said. The 20-minute city creates lots of opportunities to redesign for healthier living.”

The 20-minute city bingo cards encouraged people to take pictures of obstacles and to advocate for local improvements.

“People found sidewalks that end in the middle of something — or sidewalks with curbs too high, or no ADA curb ramps, or trees and barriers in the way. You can have all the sidewalks you want, if they are not usable, they don’t work,” Dubinin said.

Dubinin said intersections are not designed for safe walking to run errands or to get exercise. She said the 20-minute city must calm traffic and make it easier for people to get around by bike, on foot and via wheelchair. She said it is counterintuitive to drive to a nearby park, but with dangerous design and unsafe crosswalks, many people do.



*Domino Park in Brooklyn, N.Y., was designed with the help of the community. During the pandemic, circles painted on the grass reminded everyone of social distancing.*

CPEX also encourages development with more density and mixed use. It helps communities with land-use analysis, changing land-use patterns and rewriting zoning codes. It helped create the Louisiana land-use toolkit, with model ordinances.

“NAR provided a support grant to CPEX and all eight Louisiana executive districts for REALTORS®. There were tours and REALTORS® doing workshops to unveil this model ordinances book to mayors and planning commissions,” Manning-Broome said. “The ordinances put in place decades ago prevent getting around a city in 20 minutes, so the intent is to undo regulations that created suburban sprawl.”

Norman Morris, CEO of Louisiana REALTORS®, is proud of the long partnership with CPEX and REALTOR® associations in every region of the state to promote building smarter, more walkable and accessible neighborhoods with a mix of business and residential.

“People want to walk to stores, shops and services,” he said of the value of the 20-minute neighborhood. “We target an area that needs some revitalization and improve a four- to six-block area. We clean up, paint, fix up storefronts — we create an atmosphere, an environment where [walking] can be done. It creates synergy, it enhances value of the corridor and the nearby residential.”

REALTORS® in Louisiana are working with key stakeholders to support complete streets and access for all. Morris said revitalization replaces blight and allows stores to stay open later — improving business revenue — because people feel safe on the street. The statewide association also received NAR grant support to create a toolkit for building better, especially in coastal areas to adapt to climate change.

From a developer’s standpoint, the 15-minute city makes sense to Two Trees, a Brooklyn-based, family-owned real estate development firm.

“The secret of placemaking is understanding what the local community values and how we can help infuse those values into the neighborhood and be real partners to our neighbors. To create a truly authentic place, you have to involve the community to gather input on what they need and want for the health and longevity of their neighborhood,” said David Lombino, principal at Two Trees. “We’ve worked to keep the human experience at the forefront of our work, always thinking about the social power of the built environment.”

Founded in 1968, Two Trees is best-known for transforming an aging waterfront warehouse district into the DUMBO arts and tech hub in Brooklyn.

“Domino Park, along the Brooklyn waterfront in the Williamsburg neighborhood, which Two Trees financed, constructed and operates, embodies this type of approach. In designing the six-acre waterfront park, we held dozens of community-based meetings and feedback sessions so we could understand what the local community wanted in a new public space,” Lombino said.

“More recently, Domino Park has served as a critical place for New Yorkers throughout the pandemic with painted circles that encourage social distancing on the lawn, which received international recognition and became a replicable model for parks around the world,” he added.

Two Trees — which has developed a portfolio worth more than \$4 billion, including more than 2,000 apartments — agrees that the 15-minute neighborhood must include affordable housing.

“Two Trees has generated approximately 400 high-quality affordable housing units in Brooklyn and Manhattan. We have an additional 500 affordable units in the pipeline at our Domino Sugar Factory redevelopment site, and another 260 proposed units at River Ring, a new project,” Lombino said, noting that low-income units are identical



## Milan and New York are widening sidewalks, pedestrianizing streets and increasing bike lanes.

to market-rate apartments, have access to all amenities and do not have separate entrances. (A controversial feature in other developers' projects.)

Lombino said Two Trees' philosophy of diverse community building includes supporting local businesses, artists and community groups.

"We make a concerted effort to curate small businesses that suit neighborhood needs and make an intentional decision to not rent to chains that can pay top dollar. We also regularly partner with community organizations on local hiring and public art installations," he said. "We take accessibility very seriously at Two Trees — all of our buildings are ADA compliant and the vision behind the construction of Domino Park was to create an inclusive, accessible open space for all."

Strong Towns Senior Editor Daniel Herriges emphasizes that the 15-minute neighborhood saves cities the high cost of maintaining sprawl.

"It's important to remember that the cost premium for compact, mixed-use neighborhoods is largely a function of artificial scarcity, he said. "Fifteen-minute neighborhoods, and the kinds of housing that work well in them, are not expensive to create or maintain. They often have high real-estate values only because they are very popular and we haven't built enough of them in the last few decades.

Strong Towns is a nonprofit focused on strengthening the urban core while eliminating budget-busting sprawl development.

"A trend I expect will grow among cities changing their zoning to allow more missing middle and walkable urban infill development — the kind conducive to a 15-minute neighborhood — is that of building density or floor area ratio (FAR) bonuses into the zoning code specifically for affordable units," Herriges said. "The current gold standard for this with small-scale development is Portland, Ore., which passed its residential infill program (RIP) last fall. An analysis conducted by the city in consultation with several small-scale and affordable housing developers, including Neil Heller and Habitat for Humanity, found that significant affordability benefits would be achieved by the policy the city ended up passing, which provides a sliding scale of allowed FAR for buildings between four and six units — if they provide rent-reduced affordable units."

Cristina Garrido — director of Innovation for Cities-ToBe, an urban platform powered by Barcelona-based Smart Cities Consultant Anteverti — said cities around the world are embracing the 15-minute concept, especially as a reaction to the pandemic.

"Milan and New York, for example, are already widening sidewalks, pedestrianizing streets and increasing bike lanes," she said, noting that Barcelona has converted parking lots into civic space. "The pandemic has accelerated a change that had to be done if we wanted our cities to be sustainable in a mid/long term. From now on, cities will be more people-centered, and they will have more public spaces allocated for people." ●

Steve Wright (@stevewright64) is a Pulitzer-nominated, award-winning writer with 35 years of expertise in urban design and planning. His entire professional and personal life has focused on issues of inclusion, equity and accessibility for all. Based in Miami, he blogs daily at: <http://urbantravelandaccessibility.blogspot.com/>

# IMPLEMENTING 15-MINUTE CITIES:

## Where to start?



Photo courtesy of SDOT

By David Goldberg

Whatever steps your city might take to start implementing the concepts of a “15-minute city,” expect it to take a good bit longer than 15 minutes. Given the morass of regulations and ingrained economic and cultural habits to untangle, even 15 years might be ambitious in many places.

The notion of having a wide range of housing types for all ages and incomes in such proximity that most can easily walk or bike to groceries, cafes, shops and services, healthcare, schools and open space is a 180-degree reversal from the way most American cities and suburbs evolved over the last 70 years.

“Until the middle of the 20th century, the 15-minute city was simply how most people lived,” said Sam Assefa, Seattle’s planning director. In the United States, as elsewhere, the arrival of two innovations early last century

radically altered that urban reality: the automobile and segregated land uses. Zoning principles kept shops and jobs well away from residential areas, and the car allowed a radical separation that made walking or rolling among them inconceivable. Fundamentally, Assefa said, achieving the ideals embodied in the 15-minute city concept requires re-mixing everyday uses and reducing dependence on the car while remaking streets to be safe and pleasant for walking or biking.

Though many cities and suburbs have begun working toward those aims in recent years, they acquired new urgency post-pandemic, when health guidelines had us working from home and curtailing travel. Already a key focus of efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change, cities are starting to see the ideas embodied in the 15-minute city as essential to adjusting to post-pandemic reality as well, said H el ene Chartier, head of Zero Carbon Development for C40 Cities. Her organization connects 97 of the world’s cities, representing 700 million people and a quarter of the global economy, “to take bold climate action.”

C40 Cities is working to help municipalities in the United States and around the world to implement 15-minute city principles famously championed by Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo, for whom Chartier previously worked as an adviser. “After Mayor Hidalgo won reelection (last summer) on a 15-minute city platform, we were already committed,” said Chartier, herself a Paris resident. “But during the COVID lockdown we really rediscovered our neighborhoods. We were not allowed to move more than one kilometer, and police would check where you live.”

“Post-pandemic, we think many of the changes will be permanent: More people will be working remotely more days of the week,” Chartier added. “They will need co-working space, and places to go nearby during the workday. We now know how much time we can win for ourselves by not making long commutes from residential to central areas that almost close down after work hours.”

If cities and their residents aren’t going back — or at least all the way back — what is the way forward? Here are some suggested early considerations and first steps:

### Step one: Self-assessment

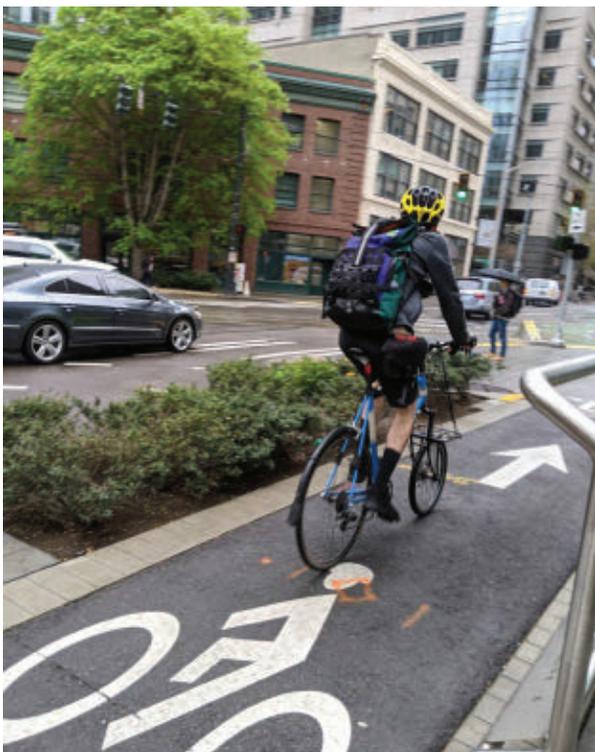
Cities should start by asking themselves, “Where are we starting from?” Chartier said. “First, you map: What are the social needs, which neighborhoods lack access to services, good shops, work? Which neighborhoods are well equipped, and which are under-equipped?”

And as you map, you need to consider the scale at which to evaluate various components, from shopping to churches, daycares and larger institutions, such as hospitals and major employers, said Lynn Richards, president and CEO of the Congress for the New Urbanism. Anticipating the current discussion by a couple of years, Melbourne, Australia, in 2017,

adopted a plan for 20-minute neighborhoods, based on research showing that people are willing to walk up to a half-mile away — a 20-minute round trip — for daily needs. But it’s also important to think about what jobs and services are accessible by a 15-minute bicycle or transit ride, Richards said. “Job centers might be a 15-minute drive or transit trip away. A day care, or a church or an urgent care might have to serve a bit larger area than a 15-minute walkshed.”

“Whatever 15-minute city means to a given neighborhood, it has to work as well for someone who is 80 as 30,” said Danielle Arigoni, director of AARP’s Livable Communities initiative. “In 2034, we will be a nation for the first time where there will be more people over the age of 65 than under 18. People outlive their ability to drive an average of 7-10 years.”

Achieving the ideals embodied in the 15-minute city requires re-mixing everyday uses and reducing dependence on the car.



Photos courtesy of SDOT

As part of its early assessment, she encourages cities to use something like AARP's Walk Audit, "a tool to get people together to walk and identify the obstacles to feeling safe and comfortable walking in their neighborhoods."

Self-assessment also means setting reasonable expectations. In Bogota, Colombia, Mayor Claudia Lopez notes that a majority of working people today spend two hours a day commuting. "We have to plan our city better," she told a New York Times webinar in fall 2020. "Not exactly to the 15-minute city like Paris, because the change from a two-hour city to a 15-minute city is too big a change, but to a 30-minute city, where we can use sustainable forms of transport."

### Identify pilot neighborhoods

Start small, with a handful of receptive communities that have gaps in being full-service neighborhoods, Chartier advised. "No city is developing everywhere. They are all focusing on pilot neighborhoods. Most of the cities we work with are starting with underserved neighborhoods: Paris, Melbourne, Bogota, Buenos Aires."

Seattle planners are starting with one neighborhood, Westwood/Highland Park, a commercial corridor of about 25 acres on the city's south end that is racially diverse with lower incomes on average and a lack of parks and play spaces.

At the same, Seattle joins most other cities in including downtown as a near-term focus: How can they rejuvenate commercial cores decimated by the pandemic-driven exodus and turn them into complete communities?

"What is the future for offices?" Chartier asked. "We know there won't be 100-percent remote working; people want to be in a place where they can work around other people. But the COVID experience has raised major questions about exclusively commercial cores." Cities including Paris and Montreal already are organizing competitions for creative ideas to transform underused offices into housing, she said. However, she noted, "It's not so easy to transform buildings designed for a specific use."

### Engagement: Listen first

Cities should expect to invest substantial time and money in listening to residents before they start planning changes to their neighborhoods, Chartier said. "Engagement is critical. Paris has dedicated a substantial budget for involving people in deciding where to go with changes to their neighborhood."

"Change happens at the speed of trust," said Margaret Wallace Brown, Houston's planning director. Houston has chosen its pilot neighborhoods precisely because they are underserved areas where the city has been developing relationships and soliciting feedback for years.

Michael Hubner, Seattle's manager for long-range planning, said the 15-minute city concept itself could be a good frame for starting the discussion with stakeholders. "I think it's helpful for getting people to think in a fresh way. It's not super wonky. The frame is 'my experience of my community.' It's especially good for talking about things like biking and walking infrastructure."

Planners need to be prepared to share examples and use images and visualizations as they engage neighbors in thinking about what they'd like to see, Assefa said. "People get uncomfortable about changes to their neighborhoods because they either don't like 'cookie cutter' development or they have a fear when they don't know what to expect. You need to be able to show people what the future result might be."

Residents in marginalized communities are likely to be concerned about gentrification and the possibility of their families, neighbors, businesses and cultural centers being displaced. Seattle has developed a map of displacement risk as well as relative access to opportunity that can help planners communicate about those concerns and the city's potential policy responses. Seattle also has commissioned an outside analysis of the racial equity implications of the growth strategy the city has pursued for 25 years. "We think this is a critical starting place to have meaningful discussions with neighborhoods," Hubner said.

Cities should plan on maintaining community relationships through many years of implementation. Because the 15-minute city idea is as much about building connectedness and belonging as it is about buildings and streets, city officials should encourage and support collaborative community projects such as gardens, shared nonprofit spaces and volunteer opportunities, Chartier said.

Cities should plan on maintaining community relationships through many years of implementation.

### Consider a grand gesture toward people-friendly streets

Many of the cities that have most enthusiastically taken up the 15-minute city challenge to create more walkable, climate-adaptive neighborhoods post-pandemic are building on big, bold moves toward people-friendly streets that have galvanized public support.

Barcelona made global news in 2016 when the city created a mostly car-free “island” by closing nine blocks to through traffic, creating what came to be known as a “superblock.” In the absence of fast-moving cars, the intersections then had the potential to become plazas or green spaces. In the wake of the pandemic, Mayor Ada Calau announced the city would create a much larger such zone for its core, 21 blocks in all. The newly created squares and the streets will be planted with trees to shade 16 acres of new green space in an urban oasis with 83 acres for quiet walking, free of car-safety worries.

To create more public, open space in its densest neighborhoods, “Paris decided to remove 50 percent of parking space in the street right-of-way,” Chartier said. “Now they are in consultation with residents about how to use the space.”

With the arrival of COVID-19, Bogota Mayor Claudia López added 52 miles of bike lanes to help people move around when transit use was restricted, a down payment on a four-year pledge to create 174 more miles of lanes for bikes, scooters and other mobility devices. The goal is for Bogota residents to make 50 percent of trips that way as the city creates more “30-minute neighborhoods.”

### Zone for walkable density and housing diversity

OK, you’ve taken the preliminary steps. Now comes the truly hard part for most American cities: Zoning reform. There’s no getting around the reality that putting daily needs within walking or biking distance of where people live means more mixing of shops and residences, and greater housing density in general. “To achieve the goals of a 15-minute city, each neighborhood should have a Main Street,” said Chartier. “Without a certain density you can’t make local shops viable, you can’t make transit viable.”

“A critical question is, ‘Do you have enough rooftops to support the things you’re looking for?’” Seattle’s Assefa said. “It takes 35-45 dwelling units per acre to support



Photos courtesy of SDOT

a corner grocery store of, say, 10,000 square feet, as well as cafes and other local-serving businesses within a walkable distance.”

The rub, of course, is that most American cities and suburbs use zoning to segregate commercial uses from residential to a great extent. And the preponderance of land identified for housing is restricted to one dwelling per lot. In Seattle, whose mayor has declared an aspiration toward 15-minute neighborhoods, three-quarters of land designated for housing is zoned “single family,” effectively banning most rental housing. Seattle’s situation is more the rule than the exception among American cities.

Just as cities might want to start by creating pilot complete neighborhoods, they can begin the transition by promoting more housing within areas that are primarily shopping districts now, and by rezoning surrounding low-density areas to allow for multi-unit buildings of various sizes.



Neighborhoods that are making a transition from car-oriented to more walkable don't necessarily need to start by adding high-rise, or even particularly large, apartment buildings, says Richards. "You don't have to completely transform the form of the neighborhood to begin to add more housing options and the people that can support the businesses and institutions you want."

She suggests starting by coding for what planners are calling the "missing middle": House-sized buildings with multiple units, such as duplexes, four- and six-plexes and courtyard apartments. "Our neighborhoods often have the big houses — they are just limited to a single home, when it could be 3, 4 or 5. It's about enabling more incremental development."

Cities might also consider using an overlay of form-based codes in areas destined to become new walkable centers, Richards suggested. Rather than dictating the use of a building, form-based codes guide the placement, massing and features of buildings so that the sum creates a pleasant, active street. Establishing rules for the look and feel in conjunction with community discussions helps to codify what residents would like to see, which in principle could help them feel more comfortable with change.

Buildings within 15-minute neighborhoods might need to have multiple uses and flexible spaces — a municipal permit center some days of the week, say, and maybe a pop-up shop on other days. "We need to have a lot more humility about directing the uses of land and buildings," Assefa said. "We have been discussing code relaxation for more flexibility to allow for reuses of buildings we haven't anticipated before."

### **Beyond zoning: Incentives and support for local-serving retail**

But zoning alone won't make the optimal array of local-serving shops come to an area, nor help businesses owned

by traditional residents stay afloat as rents rise or allow local stores to compete with online retail. "Zoning can stop things from happening, but even when you have the zoning, it's not clear whether things you want to happen will happen, without financial or other incentives," Assefa said. "And you can't be sure that the uses that come via the market will meet the needs or desires of the surrounding community."

Nor will zoning changes necessarily reduce "the barriers people of color experience for them to be homeowners or developers, or commercial space owners," he added.

In some areas, it will be important to develop public land, with local government creating the specifications for developer-applicants, Assefa suggested.

In other communities, such as Austin, Texas, the city provides an expedited permitting process and waives permitting fees for qualifying development, such as mixed-use developments.

"You can regulate the rent to make sure that smaller, essential shops can be located in the neighborhood," Chartier said. "Paris has developed a public-private partnership that is supporting local shops, focusing on underserved neighborhoods. They have been working on this for 10 years."

E-commerce and on-demand delivery "are a big, big problem" for local-serving shops, she added. Economic development officials in Paris are "trying to help smaller shops create 'click and collect' digital platforms," so that customers can order online from nearby shops and pick up their goods down the street.

**Cities are shifting more street space away from the exclusive use of private vehicles.**

## People-friendly streets and public spaces

As neighborhoods transition to become places where people can walk or roll for most or all of their daily needs, cities are weighing strategies to shift more street space away from the exclusive use of private vehicles. The goal is to create streets that not only are safer for people walking and rolling along and across them, but that also provide additional living space for urban residents, for strolling, dining, meeting, even gardening.

Strategies to do this could include requiring parking lots to go behind buildings rather than in front and adding or widening sidewalks where they are needed. Some cities in recent years have adopted a “complete streets” policy that attempts to address the needs of everyone who uses a street by adding sidewalks and bike lanes to city streets that have only accommodated cars. For cities looking toward 15-minute neighborhoods, that policy will need to be augmented by capital budgeting that actually devotes real money to those goals.

In response to social distancing and stay-home orders during the pandemic, many cities closed some residential streets to through traffic and turned them over to strolling and recreation. Some are now considering making many of those changes permanent. Seattle already has declared that 20 miles will continue in operation indefinitely, with other streets under consideration.

Fifteen-minute city proponents point to schools as the heart of the complete, walkable neighborhood. To encourage parents to walk kids to school rather than drive, provide more play and outdoor classroom area and a safe space for parents, family and kids to interact during the pandemic, Paris took steps to create calm, traffic-free “school streets.” The French version echoes a longstanding program of Safe Routes to School in the United States, which could provide a model and potential funding for cities as they implement 15-minute principles. In Paris and in some U.S. cities, school yards have been opened to the broader neighborhood outside of school hours and made available for community gardens.

Greening dense, urban areas is imperative if 15-minute cities are to succeed, not only for the human spirit and the sake of the climate, but also for economic benefit. Assefa cited studies showing that streets with significant tree canopy out-perform those without. A researcher at the University of British Columbia has suggested a 3-30-300



Photos courtesy of SDOT



rule for urban trees: Each person should be able to see 3 trees from home, in a neighborhood with 30 percent tree cover and 300 meters (roughly 1,000 feet) from the nearest park or green space. Achieving that level of greenery will inevitably require planting on a substantial share of the public rights of way that are now paved.

If you’ve made it this far, congratulations, you’ve just gotten started on creating a 15-minute city! All kidding aside, though, it will require years of time, attention and investment, but the result should be a more livable, equitable and resilient city, for all who live there, Assefa said. “This is an incredibly critical time to learn lessons from a pandemic, rising awareness around race and equity, and climate imperatives,” he added. “We can expect future pandemics and lockdowns, even as our cities and suburbs add more people. This approach is becoming more and more important. In fact, it’s vital.” ●

David A. Goldberg is a nationally recognized journalist and founding communications director of two national nonprofits, Smart Growth America and Transportation for America. In 2002, Mr. Goldberg was awarded a Loeb Fellowship at Harvard University, where he studied urban policy.



Photo by SOZIALHELDEN



# ***INCLUSION, EQUITY and ACCESSIBILITY***

## ***— Ensuring the 15-minute City Serves All***

*By Steve Wright*

**T**he 15-minute city/neighborhood, at face value, sounds as inclusive as any urban-planning concept ever introduced — jobs, housing, health care, groceries, shopping, education, parks, services and more within a 15-minute walk or bike ride. Fixed-route transit is plentiful, so no one has to own/maintain a car.

A compact, mixed-use area should have jobs to uplift low-income folks and a city designed with a diversity of services should address the needs of diverse people — those marginalized by color, gender, physical ability, etc.

But the sad fact is, unlike a big chunk of the post-World War II 20th century — when cities were affordable and wealth was clustered in suburban homes — amenity- and activity-rich city centers are increasingly affordable only to the upper class.

Ownership is out of reach for most, rent is staggeringly high and the point of entry for commercial space prevents many mom and pops shops from opening in the urban core.

So how does Charlotte, N.C., or Baton Rouge, La., let alone Paris or New York, plan for affordability, accessibility and equity — especially when many have been hit hard or crushed by pandemic economics?

Professor/urbanist/writer Richard Florida addressed many of these issues in his 2017 book, “The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle Class — and What We Can Do About It.”

**The pandemic has accelerated inequity and will increase the divide.**



Photo by SOZIALHELDEN



“Unaffordability and inequity have long been a problem in the superstar cities — New York, San Francisco, Boston, [Washington] D.C. If you look at the prices of homes — up double digits — that new urban crisis is moving to Miami, Dallas, Nashville and to the second and third tier cities,” said Florida, professor at the University of Toronto’s School of Cities and Rotman School of Management, co-founder of CityLab, and founder of the Creative Class Group.

Florida fears the pandemic will increase the divide, if government doesn’t take action. He said the pandemic already has accelerated inequity — even in terms of crucial healthcare, where Black and Latino Americans have higher COVID rates and less access to testing or vaccines.

He also noted the chasm that allows the wealthy to work from home in safety and shelter, while low-income service workers have had to face exposure at jobs that interact with the public.

Florida supports compact, vibrant, mixed-use, transit-served development. But he said unless government intervenes, only one third of the population will be able to afford to live in the 15-minute neighborhood. “We know about food deserts, lack of broadband access — these divides will accentuate, unless we do something as a society,” he said.

Florida said there have been two “rays of silver lining” the past year: a workable COVID vaccine available within a year of the outbreak and the outpouring of attention

## Converting older office, with public support, into affordable housing is a must.

focused on a more equitable society — that grew under the Black Lives Matter movement. He believes the new administration will help cities build more transit, bike lanes, housing and other infrastructure aimed at improving equity.

Florida said local governments will have to create more regional partnerships, to solve issues that extend beyond city or county boundaries. Even the trend of more permanent work from home, resulting in office vacancy, can create opportunity.

“In urban centers, residential is the highest and best use,” he said. “Converting older office, with public support, into affordable housing is a must. As we rebuild office-tower-dominated central business districts into more 15-minute neighborhoods, we must ensure they have workforce housing. There is a model for this: New York City has inclusive zoning; when a developer wants more height, they have to include 25 percent more affordable housing.”

Florida said the decline in retail creates an opportunity in the suburbs, especially for malls and office parks near major highways or on main bus routes. He said increased density and affordable housing could turn these huge land masses into livable areas with co-working space and mixed-use development.



Photo by Steve Wright

Old cities, such as Paris, need more curb ramps and marked crosswalks.



“Zoning and building regulations are a century old,” he said, noting a major overhaul to promote equity and inclusion is long overdue. “[These were] very necessary during factories, when housing needed to be separated from a polluting environment. But that set of codes is no longer adequate to deal with a clustered, knowledge-based environment.”

For more than half a century, zoning codes have been used to exclude density and affordable housing from the suburbs, Florida said. He encourages public-private partnerships to quash antiquated, exclusionary codes and to replace them with denser, more affordable housing.

“Virginia and Maryland — the places where people who work in D.C. live — never had density and no one thought they would. But over the past few decades, they have added density, offices, groceries, amenities and transit,” he said, pointing to those bedroom communities turned into more inclusive cities as an example to duplicate. “They have allowed taller, denser apartment buildings and look where Amazon HQ2 is going — right in this area [in Arlington].”

The AARP, aware that many people outlive the ability to drive a car to meet their needs and that living in isolation has negative mental and physical health impacts, has become a leading advocate for livable communities in a denser, urban setting.

“Our country is aging. By 2034, there will be more people over 65 than under age 18 for the first time ever,” said

Danielle Arigoni, AARP director of Livable Communities. “That’s a significant demographic. It calls out to ask the question, are we ready? The answer is most communities are not ready.”

“Most are not designing for older adults,” she continued, noting increased rent burden, a paucity of public transit and the lack of housing accessible to people with disabilities as major issues. “There are a number of people who want to stay in their communities, but don’t feel they are able to.”

Arigoni said many people want to walk to nearby conveniences, but most streets are too dangerous to cross. She said transit can be a lifeline to many, but most systems are not designed for older people. Subway and elevated train systems in New York, Chicago and other cities were built without elevators and even with retrofits, only a fraction of stations are accessible to people who use wheelchairs for mobility or are not capable of walking hundreds of stairs to a boarding platform.

“Older adults don’t use public spaces. They are 20 percent of the population, but participate in only 4 percent

Our country is aging. By 2034, there will be more people over 65 than under age 18.

## We must apply an age-friendly lens to how we design housing, transportation and communities.

of park use,” Arigoni said, citing a RAND Corporation study. “We must apply an age-friendly lens to how we design housing, transportation and communities.”

The age-friendly strategies are the same as the 15-minute city, she said.

“Age-friendly is very inclusive. It also is good for young people and people with disabilities of all ages,” Arigoni said, noting that AARP encourages people to advocate for a built environment that makes them comfortable and allows them to safely move about.

To encourage aging in place and accessibility, AARP published the “HomeFit Guide” featuring smart ways to make a home comfortable, safe and a great fit for older adults — and people of all ages.

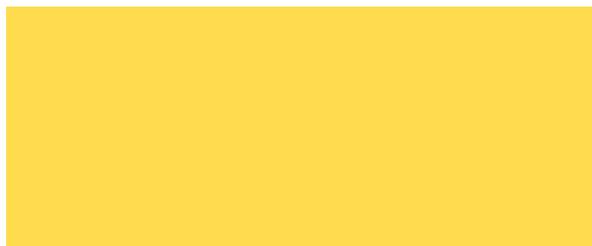
Victor Santiago Pineda — who has a Ph.D. in urban planning and uses a wheelchair for mobility — is a speaker, advocate, philanthropist and senior research fellow at the Haas Institute for Fair and Inclusive Society at Berkeley.

“We want more local-based services, more cities with mobility options — it has always been important, but COVID-19 has made it even more urgent,” he said. “We must look at inclusion. It will define the future of humanity.”

Pineda shared from a 2020 article on his work in the Haas Berkeley online newsletter:

“I have five criteria for making cities accessible. The first is about laws at every level of government and what they say about building accessibility into city services or the technologies that cities use. The second is about leadership: ‘Are city leaders talking about these issues and using their budgets to identify barriers and remove them?’” Pineda said in the article.

“The third area, which is critical, is about institutional capacity. You need a cross-agency approach. For example, do all 56 agencies in New York City’s government understand what digital accessibility is?” he asked. “My fourth criterion is about participation and representation. Are you only talking to people who use wheelchairs about how to build an accessible smart city, or are you also asking people with dementia?”



Now, because of COVID-19, many more people are experiencing how it feels to have barriers and restrictions placed on how they access public spaces and services.

“Finally, we need to change attitudes. We continue to have a divergent set of implicit biases around race, gender, and something called ‘ableism.’ We’ve inherited a public infrastructure that is ableist by design — meaning that, even with the ADA, it still gives preferences to people who can open doors, climb stairs, run around,” Pineda said in the newsletter. “Now, because of COVID-19, many more people are experiencing how it feels to have barriers and restrictions placed on how they access public spaces and services, so there is a greater appreciation for the challenges persons with disabilities have long experienced.”

Tamika Butler — African American, Lesbian rights advocate, attorney and nonprofit manager — is founder and principal of the transportation and urban planning firm, Tamika L. Butler Consulting.

“For me, the approach should be ‘how are we able to do this in the most intersectional way?’” Butler said. “Who’s able to talk about race, gender, trans people, undocumented immigrants — and how transportation and urban planning must consider a project’s impact through many lenses.”

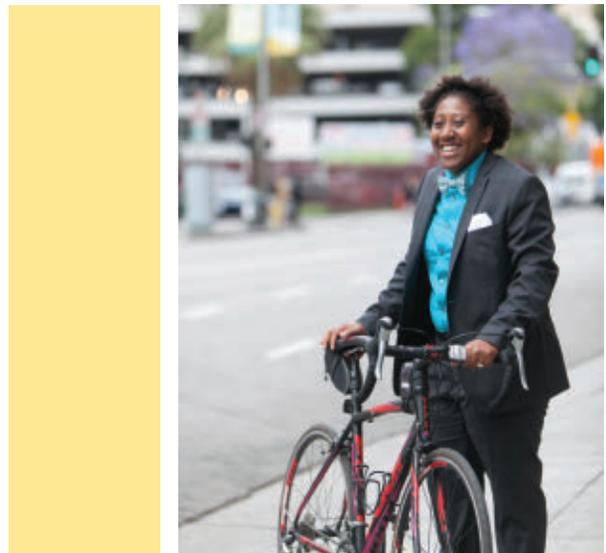
Butler works on walking, biking and transportation projects, plus she advises nonprofits. All of the work is done with clients that buy into the idea of equity, of giving a voice to those who have been ignored in conventional planning processes.

“We plan spaces, we like to think we’re planning for every man or every woman — but we’re doing everything based on able-bodied white folks. They are not built in a way that others, people that are different, can relate to or use them,” she said, noting she is proud of her diverse background and hopes the public realm can be designed for all.

Butler said intersectional planning is not simply about equity for marginalized people, it also implies connectivity between related issues that must be considered before a viable, sustainable decision can be made.



Photo by SOZIALHELDEN



Tamika Butler, who is founder and principal of Tamika L. Butler Consulting, focuses on intersectional planning.



Photo by SOZIALHELDEN



Photo by Steve Wright

Discarded scooters block accessible path to crosswalk activator at one of Miami's busiest intersections.

“Transportation and climate crisis are intrinsically linked,” she said. “Everyone doesn’t experience space the same way, so we have to be thoughtful. Public works departments rushed to create outdoor space in response to the pandemic, but they didn’t engage diverse views. No one asked ‘If you use a wheelchair, is that sidewalk dining accessible for you?’”

Whether it is called the 15-minute neighborhood or any other term for a neighborhood with diverse offerings, it must be designed with inclusion in mind, Butler emphasized. She noted few cities seek input from the LGBTQ community.

“If you are not bringing in that perspective, you’re missing it,” she said. Talk to people, have a team full of queer folks talk about their experience. How does it feel to be trans, to feel different? How can you create a space where people can be themselves?”

Heidi Johnson-Wright, a law school graduate and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance professional, has used a power wheelchair for mobility for 35 years.

“Many people with disabilities would welcome the benefits of the 15-minute neighborhood because of the reduction of car dependence,” she said. “Some cannot or do not want to drive. Many who can drive cannot afford to buy and insure a vehicle.”

People with disabilities have high rates of unemployment and are more likely to live in poverty than any other minority group. Those who survive on a monthly government (SSI) benefits check receive less than \$800, which is all they have for rent, food, transportation, etc.

“Unfortunately, transportation remains a challenge for people with disabilities, especially for people who use mobility devices such as power wheelchairs and scooters. When transit is well maintained, wheelers can access fixed-route buses and trains, as well as paratransit,” Johnson-Wright noted.

Transportation remains a challenge for people with disabilities, especially for people who use mobility devices such as power wheelchairs and scooters.

## The 15-minute city vision must not be just about the physical built environment, but also about the social environment.

Getting to transit requires smooth sidewalks with a clear path of travel — free of obstructions such as signs, utility poles and, street furniture — at least 36 inches wide with curb ramps at every corner.

“Another challenge is the recent proliferation of alternative modes of travel, often billed as ‘first mile, last mile’ solutions — such as rentable bikes and motorized scooters,” Johnson-Wright said. “None of these, including rideshare and car share, is accessible to wheelchair users. All of this results in social isolation and a serious lack of mobility for disabled people.”

The 15-minute city cannot be inclusive without a major increase in public spending to boost sidewalk and transit access. Despite the ADA, which turned 30 last year, requiring readily achievable barrier removal since 1992, many buildings have barriers that discourage or outright prevent disabled people from patronizing local businesses within walking/rolling distance of their homes. These include steps at entrances, narrow doorways, too-high counters and inaccessible restrooms.

Johnson-Wright cited Cambridge, Massachusetts’ Storefront Improvement Program as a model for a public-private partnership resulting in access for all.

“The Program improves the physical appearance of independent businesses and enhances access,” she said of the resource available to property owners and tenants. “Reimbursement grants range from \$2,500 to \$35,000, based on the scope of work. For barrier removal, there’s a 90-percent-matching grant up to \$20,000 for ADA improvements to entrances, including ramps, lifts, doors hardware and automatic openers, accessible parking and signage.”

Amanda O’Rourke is executive director at 8 80 Cities, a Toronto-based planning firm dedicated to making cities accessible and livable to those ages 8 to 80. “The 15-minute city vision is aligned with our values. It creates cities that are more inclusive,” she said. “The vision must not be just about the physical built environment, but also

about the social environment — communities participating and being part of the process.”

“Theoretically, it is very much about creating equitable places,” she added, saying the concept must correct the errors of the last century of planning — which fostered disparity, segregation and worse. “The details really matter. We must really design cities that promote health and well-being for all.”

O’Rourke said the 15-minute neighborhood/city cannot be a vision in a report, it has to be a shift of spending. She said a city budget is a reflection of true priorities — is the spending on infrastructure for people, or cars?

“COVID has definitely helped people understand the importance of their local neighborhood more than ever,” she said. “Why the interest in 15-minute neighborhood has sparked again? If they are able to access all their goods and services within a 15-minute walk, it’s so much more convenient in the pandemic. And people are seeing how inconvenient a neighborhood is where needs cannot be met on foot.”

O’Rourke said to keep essential workers on the job, cities need better transit. She said the pandemic has underscored the need for zoning that facilitates a better built and social environment.

“Communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, are also underserved by park space, walkability, traffic safety,” she said. “Communities need to define their own priorities instead of top-down planning. Communities



## Communities need to define their own priorities instead of top-down planning.

need to drive the fine grain development, amenities and ensure different levels of affordability.”

Cristina Garrido — director of Innovation for Cities-ToBe — said while Barcelona, New York and Paris are trying to address affordable housing, every city must focus on this issue.

“Access to housing was already an increasing and unresolved problem in big cities,” she said of the necessity of affordable housing in the 15-minute city. “While urban central areas are gentrifying and real estate has become a luxury good, there are millions of people living in poor housing conditions and informal settlements around the world. So, this pandemic has only made it clearer that having a decent house to live in is a human right we should all have.” ●

Steve Wright (@stevewright64) is a Pulitzer-nominated, award-winning writer with 35 years of expertise in urban design and planning. His entire professional and personal life has focused on issues of inclusion, equity and accessibility for all. The Miami-based storytelling consultant blogs daily at: <http://urbantravelandaccessibility.blogspot.com/>



Photo by Steve Wright

Paris, to add more open, public space, transformed an elevated railway into an accessible urban park called Coulee Verte Rene Dumont.



Courtesy of UNDP



# FIFTEEN MINUTES TO YOUR HAPPY PLACE



Courtesy of NYC & Company/Julienne Schaefer

*A key component of the  
15-minute neighborhood  
is the ability to quickly  
and easily travel to a  
spot that serves as a  
personal retreat.*

By G. M. Filisko

When you picture Detroit, you may not envision its 252 miles of bike lanes and trails. That's a huge jump from the roughly 13 miles in place in 2007, when the nonprofit Detroit Greenways Coalition began advocating for more greenways, complete streets, and biking trails throughout the city.

“Detroit has one of the largest protected bike lane networks in the United States now,” says Todd Scott, the group’s executive director. “The city has made a lot of investments in building complete streets that are safe for biking and walking.”

Detroit is far from done adding green spaces. This spring, phase one construction is scheduled for the Joe Lewis Greenway, a 30-mile green path that will encircle the city and connect it to the suburbs, including Dearborn, Hamtramck, Highland Park, and Ferndale. It features two trails, one for biking and one for walking and is expected to take a decade to be completed.

The Motor City is onto something. In a time when there are few things most people seem to agree on, 83 percent of Americans reported that they personally benefit from local parks, according to “The Case for Open Space,” a 2018 Urban Land Institute (ULI) publication.

The neighborhoods where residents are most content are those in which they can quickly and easily get to their happy place, whether it’s a park, a bike trail, an open space with a public art installation, or some other haven.

“I think everybody is aligned around the importance of high-quality parks and public spaces, especially now, where we’re gathering outside, and exercising inside is so challenging,” says Rachel MacCleery, senior vice president of Building Healthy Places at the Urban Land Institute in Washington, D.C.

However, there’s still work to be done in ensuring that all neighborhoods have parks and open spaces within easy walking or biking distance.

## **An unparalleled value**

Considering Americans’ unparalleled support for parks and open spaces, it may be surprising that advocates often

## Detroit has one of the largest protected bike lane networks in the United States.

have to push to have such spaces readily accessible to all neighborhoods. But they do, though that's changing.

"The idea of the 15-minute neighborhood means that people have the option to get everything they need on a daily basis within 15 minutes of home," explains Jay Renkens, principal of MIG, a Denver planning and design firm rooted in environmental psychology and social science. "That also includes a 10-minute park approach. Normally, that means parks should be within a half mile of a neighborhood."

Renkens says recreational options are integral to that navigable neighborhood. "Most people identify parks and recreation and trails as key assets that people should have within the 15-minute neighborhood," he says. "But the true benefits aren't necessarily widely understood."

"I think people generally say it's great to have a place to recreate," explains Renkens. "Or maybe people understand the nuance of active and passive recreation, like the urban respite, a term used in planning to mean a place to breathe, to get away from the buildings and development."

"But trails in particular also provide transportation, so they can enhance the 15-minute neighborhood," he notes. "On the park side, there are other benefits beyond physical and psychological wellbeing. Studies show there are economic benefits for nearby residential, commercial, and mixed-use properties. They benefit in terms of the value of that land, and sales tend to increase."

Public art that serves as a place for community members to gather is also part of the equation, a fact that leaders at the Chicago Association of REALTORS® recognize. "CAR has completed placemaking projects that make the community a better place to live and work, and more are in process," says Nykea Pippion McGriff, ABR®, BPOR, CIPS, GRI, PSA, SFR®, vice president of strategic growth at Coldwell Banker Realty and CAR president.

CAR partnered with other organizations to highlight an up-and-coming retail corridor with a mural of longtime Chatham resident and poet Gwendolyn Brooks, which McGriff says spurred community stakeholders to create an adjacent seating area. It's also contributing to the



Courtesy of Detroit Greenways Coalition



(Above) Rendering, which illustrates the planned elements of the Joe Lewis Greenway in Detroit.



Courtesy of NYC & Company/Tagger Yancey



Courtesy of Chicago Association of REALTORS®

The Chicago Association of REALTORS® has completed placemaking projects, such as this Gwendolyn Brooks mural.



Courtesy of NYC & Company/Brittany Petronella

Lakeview Low-Line project in support of efforts to create an art walk in a space beneath the Brown Line el tracks.

“Art is an extension of the beauty that surrounds us and we’ve forgotten that as we’ve been stuck in our houses,” says McGriff. “It’s time for us to focus not on what’s on our phone and look up and look around. For me, these efforts are personally a reminder of the beauty around us.”

### So why isn’t there more?

Yet not all urban planners and municipal leaders prioritize these spaces. Broadly, planners understand how vital these spaces are in creating or updating their communities, notes Rachel Banner, Seattle-based director of park access at the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA).

“But when it comes down to making choices and decisions related to planning, sometimes those don’t reflect the values stated,” she says. “Things are getting better. For instance, ULI has published case studies [<https://casestudies.uli.org>] of how we capture the value of parks in development and ensure they’re in the fabric of communities.”

What challenges arise? First, these spaces cost money. However, as Renkens notes, there’s a strong argument they bring huge value in return. “People think you’re taking this 10 acres ‘off the tax rolls,’” he explains. “They then quickly or incorrectly prioritize development over an open space. The bigger picture is that you’re creating direct and indirect value for the community by including open space.

“It’s the right thing to do, but if you dig deeper, the financial bottom line is that you tend to come out ahead even from a tax-roll perspective if you include these features,” he states. “Maybe there are 10 fewer lots, but the value of that neighborhood will be higher and should exceed the loss of the direct math of taking those lots ‘off the tax rolls.’”

Also, some open spaces achieve their mission better than others. Hodgepodge spaces, for example, can be less than ideal. “Maybe during the planning process, a certain amount of green space is required, but the type of space isn’t always specified,” states Banner. “What can happen is that you end up with these tiny little spaces as opposed to one larger green space that’s part of the fabric of the community.”

“Maybe a private building has a private courtyard,” she explains. “So, spaces aren’t always public. And if they are, they may not feel like public spaces. That maybe does have an environmental impact, but research on parks and health tends to find that oblong or odd-shaped but continuous parks that flow through a community encourage more physical activity.”

In addition, some spaces are higher-quality for other reasons. “One question is whether you can get to a space by walking,” notes MacCleery. “What kind of barriers exist? Barriers might be physical, such as the park being close but not walkable because it’s separated by a big highway, a transportation barrier, or other kinds of access barriers. Maybe there’s not good visibility into the park. Maybe it doesn’t feel safe or accessible for someone in a wheelchair or someone who has a visual impairment.

“It’s not just whether there physically is a green space, but how well-loved and used that space is by the community — that’s also super key,” she states. “We have a publication coming out soon looking at what it really means to have a high-quality park. It’s an elusive concept, but it includes how well maintained it is, how adequate its facilities are, and how well it meets the needs of the community.”

**Parks should be within a half mile of a neighborhood.**



Courtesy of NRPA



Courtesy of NRPA

### Parks face reckoning

The question of the quality of parks and open spaces has become even more complicated as leaders in the parks and recreation movement have begun to address racial injustice in the nation's park systems.

"Professionals have been more open to acknowledging and recognizing the harm they've done in the past to Black people and indigenous peoples," says Banner. "If Black people went to a park, they had separate facilities where they were allowed to go — that was only a generation ago."

The NPRA is currently working on a history of parks from an equity perspective, she says. And part of that discussion includes recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach for parks leaves some neighborhoods behind.

"If we want people to use places and be healthy, we have to meet them where they're at, understand why they're not engaging in that place, and be supportive of them in that process," Banner states. "That's where we have to acknowledge the mistakes we've made before we can go forward."

Renkens says inequities generally fall into three areas. First, there can be less park acreage in lower-income areas, which he says is relatively common because such communities often have smaller or fewer parks. "Then there are cases in which areas have parks that were originally included, probably in older communities with a lot of migration of different demographics, but those parks haven't been invested in," he adds. "The parks don't meet current standards. They're falling apart or have areas that are literally taped or coned off. Do those serve the purpose they were supposed to serve?"

Detroit is making an effort to counteract this phenomenon. "It's intentionally building the first section of the Joe Lewis Greenway in the Midwest neighborhood, which

### Continuous parks that flow through a community encourage more physical activity.

has seen the least attention and investment by the city," reports Todd. "They could have started in another area but purposely went into this neighborhood, which hasn't seen that much investment at all, to counteract the narrative that green spaces should be prioritized in the better sections of town."

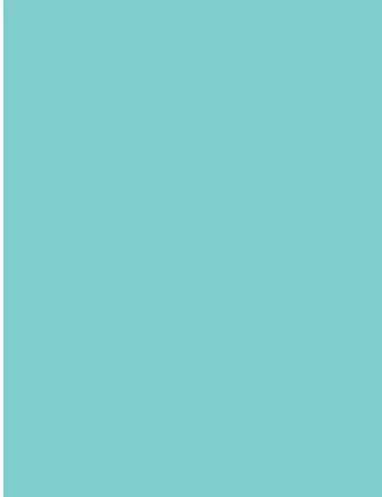
Another inequity Renkens notes is when parks simply don't meet the needs of the community. "We're working in Amarillo, Texas, and what we're finding there isn't uncommon," says Renkens. "They have standards for neighborhood parks — a playground, a picnic shelter, a bathroom — and you can list them off. But those standards don't necessarily serve the cultural needs of the neighborhoods around them.

"Recreational preferences change," he explains. "Amarillo has a large Hispanic population, and they're clamoring for soccer fields and courts for futsal, which is a variation on soccer. They also want gathering places and picnic areas that you don't necessarily have to rent."

The key is finding what's needed in each community. "We're grappling with equity, but it doesn't mean the same thing everywhere," says Renkens. "It means giving communities what they need — and that could be different based on different factors."

### Open spaces get pandemic love

And then there's the pandemic. On that front, there's a silver lining. Americans have rediscovered their local parks



and outdoor spaces. But when the pandemic ends, will Americans' love affair with such spaces end, too?

"There's been a 100-percent increase in people's awareness of the value of parks and open space due to the pandemic," asserts Banner. "Also, one of the things NRPA strives to achieve is to help people understand what it takes to have, and who's responsible for maintaining, those spaces. Today, not only do people value parks and open spaces, but they also value the people who make them happen."

"Parks have been among the places where vaccines have been distributed," she explains. "They've housed unhoused populations who couldn't stay in temporary shelters. They've set up distance learning and places for kids who don't have parents at home. I think the public is only starting to understand the value of parks."

At the same time, where have advocates for racial justice gathered in the past year? "Parks were the center of a lot of protests, where people could go to actively participate in democracy," says Banner. "Those places need to be there for people to exercise their First Amendment rights."

Another silver lining is that many communities got creative with open spaces to allow socially distanced outdoor activities during the pandemic, a movement that has impressed Renkens. "We've seen the creation of new recreational opportunities and outdoor gathering spaces," he says. "Most people have seen the closing of a main street or something like that, which does serve that parks-and-recreation-outdoor-gathering need."

## People today recognize the value of parks.

"But the closure of a street can be full or partial," he adds. "You could close the street going one way and keep the other half for parking. We're seeing streets close for outdoor dining, for walking and dining, and for urban trails. We've seen direct recreational amenities added, like fitness things you can do, such as pull ups. And there are probably places where the partial closure of a street could help an underserved community, too, such as where residents don't have access to a trail."

MacCleery says her organization is working on a report highlighting the innovative solutions implemented by governments around the world during the pandemic. "Many have adapted existing open spaces and made them public spaces, such as converting a parking lot to a publicly accessible park space," she says. "They've closed streets and slowed down cars, and they're taking a new look at existing infrastructure to better meet the needs of the community. There's been a lot of experimentation, and it'll be interesting to see how long those experiments stay in place."

The NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® Placemaking Grant program, which provides funding to state and local REALTOR® associations to support their efforts to create public gathering places, including



Courtesy of NYC & Company/Alex Lopez



Courtesy of NRPA

community gardens, dog parks, and trails, saw steady interest in the grants through 2020. It turns out that building community gardens is a viable activity even when social distancing is required. Examples of the projects can be found at: <https://www.nar.realtor/blogs/spaces-to-places>

But will Americans continue to seek outdoor spaces when they can safely gather indoors again? That’s hard to say, but the advocates believe so.

“That’s the question we talk about a lot here,” says Banner. “Unfortunately, in 2008, after the economic crisis, parks and recreation were the most-hit government entities budget-wise and the slowest to recover. There’s a large fear the same thing is going to happen today — except that one difference is that people today do recognize the value of parks more than they did during the recession.”

MacCleery also can’t answer with certainty, but she too is optimistic. “I’d like to believe that a deepened appreciation for the value of parks will continue to spur private investment from the public and private sector in both parks and open spaces,” she says. “What’s going to happen with workplaces, downtowns, housing development — that’s so very much an unfolding question. But I’m overall optimistic of the future of cities. I think we’ve learned that people need to be together.” ●

G.M. Filisko is an attorney and freelance writer who writes frequently on real estate, business and legal issues. Ms. Filisko served as an editor at NAR’s REALTOR® Magazine for 10 years.



Courtesy of NRPA



Courtesy of NRPA



Courtesy of City of Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability

The rendering illustrates future plans for expanding Portland's greenways.

## Transportation in the 15-Minute City

# MAKING PEDESTRIANS THE PRIORITY

By Joan Mooney

When it comes to transportation, urban planners have different definitions of the 15-minute city or neighborhood. But most agree, pedestrians are the priority.

“The definition I’ve always worked with is, a neighborhood where all residents are within a short walk of school, transit, access to fresh food, parks and other necessities,” said Beth Osborne, vice president of transportation for Smart Growth America.

“Two things are fundamental,” Osborne said. “The things you need are put close to you. And you won’t die on the way to it.” Osborne spearheads an annual program called “Dangerous by Design,” with a list of 10 U.S. cities that have had the most pedestrian deaths in the past year. She’s well aware of the potential hazards of neighborhoods that are not designed with pedestrian safety in mind.

Amanda Leahy, president of the Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professionals and associate planner for Kittelson and Associates, is based on the west coast and

has a slightly different view of the 15-minute neighborhood. It should have walkable places and offer a mix of uses that allow people to reduce their transportation footprint, Leahy said. To that end, she includes transit.

Andres Duany, a founder of New Urbanism and founding partner of DPZ CoDesign, Miami, called the 15-minute city a “slippery ideal” in a recent piece in *UrbanProjectization.com*. Although transit is an important transportation option in a sustainable city, Duany noted that including it as a way to reach a destination in 15 minutes depends on the time needed to travel to the transit stop, wait for pickup, travel on the bus or other mode, and walk to the destination on the other end. There are too many unknowns that affect reliable timing.

There are many benefits when a city makes it easier to walk, bicycle, or use a wheelchair.

## Cities are planning for 15-minute neighborhoods with a variety of transportation options.

### Car as an option

Most planners agree that residents' ability to access their daily needs in 15 minutes does not include driving a car to get to them.

"We want to design a place where you would like a car as an option," Duany told "On Common Ground." "We want your car to be an instrument of liberation, that's elegant and comfortable and that gets you out into the country. You don't want it to become a kind of wheelchair, just used for daily needs."

As a planner, "you have to have a positive attitude toward the car," said Duany. "Otherwise, you just sound like a Martian."

Driving is also entwined with economic equity. Cities like Minneapolis are trying to make it easier for those without a car to get around by making other options, especially walking and bicycling, more available. But, Duany said, "as people arrive in [higher] social strata, people who haven't had a car want a car."

Racial equity comes into it, too. Toronto-based urban designer Jay Pitter, speaking at the recent CityLab 2021 conference, said that marginalized communities often resist beneficial concepts like walkability and bike lanes because those changes have often brought gentrification.

Americans' attachment to the car is not simply a matter of culture or convenience. The federal government created current land-use regulations in 1924 to accommodate highways, said Osborne of Smart Growth America.

"I blame misapplied rules," she said. "Rules that were applied for a highway setting are now applied as one size fits all. Engineers are given the specs.

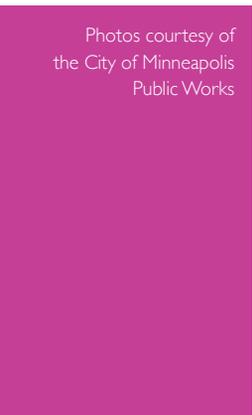
"Walkable communities are not built anymore," said Osborne. "They're illegal according to most land-use codes. But demand has skyrocketed."

The NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® 2020 Community & Transportation Preference Survey found that approximately 50 percent of respondents would forgo a single-family home and live in an attached dwelling (townhouse, condo, apartment) if it meant that they could walk to most of their daily needs.

Still, some cities are planning for 15-minute neighborhoods with a variety of transportation options. There are many benefits when a city makes it easier to walk, bicycle, or use a wheelchair or newer modes like e-scooters. It's good for residents' health and the environment. Those without a car might find it easier to meet their basic needs. And with fewer traffic jams and associated noxious fumes, the quality of life improves.



Photos courtesy of the City of Minneapolis Public Works



Photos courtesy of the City of Minneapolis Public Works



Mobility hubs will bring together a lot of different modes of transportation — scooters, bicycles, carshare.

### Walkability for older residents

Can transportation for the elderly be accommodated in a 15-minute neighborhood?

“Most [older] people can walk longer than they can drive,” said Duany, who designed a neighborhood in Atlanta for the AARP. “They don’t want to walk long distances. They want to sit down and rest along the way.” More benches and shade may be needed.

“People are not going to walk more than a quarter-mile,” he said. “They will walk to their neighborhood medical center. It’s much easier than driving.”

The medical center should not be the only place within walking distance for seniors, Duany said.

“What’s underestimated is the need to have fun,” he said. “People will walk for fun to bands, dances, restaurants. They’re not going to walk to the grocery store to carry milk home.”

Here are three cities of varying sizes that are incorporating 15-minute neighborhood transportation into their planning.

### Minneapolis: Aims to cut driving by 37 percent in 10 years

Minneapolis created a 10-year Transportation Action Plan in December 2020, based on city values. “Our streets will be designed to address a climate emergency by emphasizing low- or no-carbon travel,” the report states. Other priorities are addressing racial inequities and adding protection for people walking and bicycling.

“We’re trying to open up options so people aren’t forced to do one thing,” said Kathleen Mayell, transportation planning manager for the Minneapolis Department of Public Works. The order of priority in the plan is walking, bicycling and transit.

But “we’re still planning for people driving,” said Mayell. The plan envisions that solo car trips will drop from 40 percent of all travel in 2019 to 20 percent in 2030. Three of every five trips will be taken by walking, biking or transit.

The goal is to cut driving by 37 percent by 2040 to meet the city’s Climate Action Plan. That means the average resident would have to drive just four miles less a day.

With mass transit, the goal is to connect people over greater distances than they can cover by biking or walking.

“We’re working on mobility hubs,” Mayell said. “They will bring together a lot of different modes of transportation — scooters, bicycles, carshare. This plan is aligned with the 15-minute city.”

The city’s goal is to increase transit coverage so that by 2030, three-quarters of residents live within a quarter-mile of high-frequency transit corridors, and 90 percent live within a half mile.

How has the pandemic affected the city’s transportation plan?

“It reinforces a lot of the work and the planning,” said Mayell, “having these safe, comfortable ways to get around, having transit networks that work well. It’s a good alternative to driving, as people are vaccinated.

“We’re converting our street space to more biking and walking areas,” she said. “We worked with the park board to provide space for people to be outside more comfortably.”

Part of the transportation plan is an all-ages-and-abilities bicycle network, protected bikeways separated from fast moving traffic.

The transportation plan is also based on Vision Zero, a national program adopted by the city, with the aim of zero pedestrian deaths. In Minneapolis, planners are focused on sidewalks, the safety and comfort of walking, and pedestrians’ ability to safely cross the street. In November, the speed limit was lowered on all city-owned streets. Residential streets are 20 mph, busier ones 25 mph, and a few are 30 mph.

### Portland, Ore: Neighborhood greenways, Slow Streets

Instead of the 15-minute neighborhood, Portland planners use the term “complete neighborhood.” Complete neighborhoods emphasize pedestrians, bicyclists and transit as the best ways to access parks, healthy food,

Complete neighborhoods emphasize pedestrians, bicyclists and transit as the best ways to access parks, healthy food, commercial services and schools.



Photos courtesy of the City of Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability



Photos courtesy of the City of Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability

commercial services and schools. The goal of the Portland Plan, adopted in 2012, is that by 2035, 80 percent of Portlanders will live in a complete neighborhood, up from 63 percent in 2019.

To make walking, bicycling and rolling safer, the city has developed a network of neighborhood greenways. (Rolling refers to people in wheelchairs or using micromobility options such as skateboards and e-scooters.) Greenways have little car traffic, and the speed limit is low, often 20 mph. They are the backbone of Portland's Safe Routes to School network and aim to connect neighborhoods, parks, schools and business districts. The city has more than 100 miles of neighborhood greenways, and more are planned.

Part of the transportation plan is an all-ages-and-abilities bicycle network.

The city's 2020 status report on neighborhood greenways explains the problem starkly: "Portland is growing but our roadway space is not. If we don't provide better travel options, we'll have an additional 110,000 cars on the streets by 2035, a 54 percent increase."

To allow more space for physical distancing during the pandemic, Portland created the Slow Street initiative. On neighborhood greenways, "temporary signs and traffic control devices limit auto traffic to local trips and emergency vehicle access only," the report says. Traffic control devices include speed bumps, median islands for pedestrians to use when crossing bigger roads, and signs diverting cut-through traffic to main thoroughfares. The Portland Bureau of Transportation recommends continuing a seasonal Slow Streets program limiting cars to local access once the pandemic winds down.

Many cities have adopted Slow Streets, including New Orleans, San Francisco and Washington, D.C.

### Neptune Beach, Fla.: Complete Streets policy stresses safety

Fred Jones is senior project manager at Michael Baker International, a proponent of walkable cities and vice mayor of Neptune Beach, Fla., a suburb of Jacksonville. He was not happy to see Jacksonville sixth on Smart Growth America's "Dangerous by Design 2019" list of America's 10 most dangerous cities for pedestrians.

Jones is well aware that Florida metro areas claim seven of the top 10 spots on the "Dangerous by Design 2021" list. Jacksonville, at least, has gone from sixth to tenth.

"Once air conditioning became prevalent in Florida, it was all high-speed, high-capacity thoroughfares through communities," Jones said. "Most issues are around arterial roadways designed for faster traffic. You mix that with walking, it's a dangerous scenario."

Neptune Beach passed a Complete Streets policy two years ago. Smart Growth America has identified the elements of a Complete Streets policy designed to "ensure streets are safe for people of all ages and abilities, balance the needs of different [transportation] modes, and support local land uses, economies, cultures and natural environments."

Even though Neptune Beach is a suburb of one of the most dangerous cities in North America for walking and biking, said Jones, "it also embodies active transportation — walking, biking to the beach.



Photos courtesy of the City of Neptune Beach

July 4th pre-pandemic: First Street in Neptune Beach functions essentially as a shared route. On any given beautiful day there are numerous cyclists and skateboarders that take over. However, on July 4 it literally is a parade of bicycles.

Neptune Beach, Fla., built a greenway to make it easier for residents to walk or bike to the beach.

## Neptune Beach embodies active transportation — walking, biking to the beach.

“So, it makes sense to pass a resolution to make sure when we approach infrastructure design, we look at it from the standpoint of safety, mobility and complete streets. It provides accessibility to destinations.”

Emphasizing the safety aspect helped Jones sell the plan to the city council, which was mainly concerned that it would obligate the city to set aside funding for complete streets projects.

“It’s not going to change our budget,” Jones said, “just how we do projects.”

Neptune Beach now has planned several projects for greenways, walking and biking trails, and pedestrian-friendly street design. Especially significant was its decision to resurface A1A, a major road, and add a flashing overhead sign that tells cars pedestrians are crossing.

The city also built a greenway on 3rd Street, through the center of town. It is part of the East Coast Greenway that runs the length of the East Coast. Listings on Realtor.com and Zillow now add “access to East Coast Greenway” as a selling point for a home.

The greenway also makes it easier for residents to walk or bike to the beach or to other daily needs.

“The great thing about the 15-minute city is, it recognizes we used to have this five-minute walk shed, with

everything built around the scale of a single neighborhood,” said Jones. Newer mobility options such as e-scooters or e-bikes expand the options for ways to get around the city without driving. After all, the city is just two square miles.

### After the pandemic

Before COVID-19, commuting accounted for 20 to 25 percent of all trips, said Osborne of Smart Growth America. With more people working at home, the proportion of commuting trips is much lower.

“Nonwork trips are much shorter,” Osborne said. “That’s the beginning of the 15-minute city. If we started caring about the nonwork trip — which is more likely to be taken by a woman — how could we remove barriers, so she could walk to pick up her kids from school and pick up groceries on the way home? It could be something as simple as a wider sidewalk.”

After a year, “the pandemic has changed the way we interact with our neighborhood,” said Osborne. “Cities have been forced to experiment. Restaurants have decided to take away parking, offer more outdoor seating and more space to pick up carryout. There’s more space for people to be able to walk.”

That part, at least, might be a good result of a very difficult year. ●

Joan Mooney is a freelance writer in Washington, D.C., who wrote the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® Water Infrastructure Toolkit.



Courtesy of the Village at Shirlington

# The Best Recipe for 15-Minute Livability

**A mix of strategies, including adaptive reuse and data analysis, is imperative when creating the neighborhood for everything.**

*By Brian E. Clark*

I grew up in Tipton, Iowa, a town of around 3,000 people about 25 miles from Iowa City — home to the University of Iowa. The seat of government for Cedar County, Tipton was the focal point for surrounding, even smaller villages. My little burg, it seemed, had nearly everything we needed. (Culture and Big Ten sporting events were only a 30-minute drive away.)

The weekly newspaper that my father edited and later purchased was less than a 10-minute walk from our home. The town's two grocery stores were only a few blocks away from his office, as were the library, two pharmacies, men's and women's clothing stores, a dry cleaner's, a shoe repair shop, several doctors' offices and my favorite as a kid, a "Dime Store" with its dazzling display of penny candies. Three churches were all within a short walk.

This was the 1970s and our community was pretty much self-contained, with the elementary school a four-block walk from my family's house and the combined junior high/high school a whopping nine-blocks away. The big community park was also about the same distance.

I left for college in Colorado after high school and eventually ended up working for a newspaper in San Diego, living in a suburb and having to drive just about everywhere for anything. It never felt right.

Fast forward several decades with more than a few moves in between. I'm now back in the Midwest, in Middleton, Wisc., — on the northwest edge of Madison and only three blocks from a grocery store, a cafe, barber shop and dry cleaner in the Middleton Hills development. The town's library, schools, swimming pool, tennis courts and other amenities are only a short bike ride away. My commute to my basement office takes about 20 seconds. I'm in heaven.

Chris Zimmerman, Smart Growth America's vice president for Economic Development and director of the

Walkable neighborhoods where most basic needs are within a 15-minute walk are in high demand.



Courtesy of the City of Middleton

Governors' Institute on Community Design, says these walkable neighborhoods where most basic needs are within a 15-minute walk are now in high demand. He lives on the edge of one, not far from the Village at Shirlington, a downtown built on the former Shirlington Shopping Center in Arlington, Va.

And while my town grew up organically, Zimmerman's neighborhood and others like it are being created by developers and city planners using data analysis and other techniques to ensure that they will be successful.

### Creating mixed use on parking lots

The Federal Realty Investment Trust — which has a mission of delivering “long-term, sustainable growth through investing in densely populated, affluent communities where retail demand exceeds supply” — was the company behind the Shirlington project.

Around a decade-and-one-half ago, it turned what Zimmerman said were “mostly parking lots” on the 26-acre Shirlington site into a mixed-use center with a grocery store, movie theater, county library, post office and restaurants. It also included a transit center, which Zimmerman said is essential because as many as 30 percent of the U.S. population doesn't have drivers' licenses. Moreover, he noted, many young people don't want to own cars and would rather use ride-sharing services or rent vehicles on occasion.

Zimmerman said the redeveloped town center also has townhouse, apartments, condos and some rental apartments for needed density and to serve the needs of those who don't want to own a single-family residence.

“I don't live in the town center, but there are a lot of people who do and can walk right downstairs to do their shopping and run other errands to meet life's essential

Neighborhoods are being created by developers and city planners using data analysis to ensure that they will be successful.

needs,” explained Zimmerman, who said he lives in a nearby neighborhood that grew up “before everything was totally car-oriented.”

“There are a lot of communities out there that are fundamentally walkable and fairly dense, with single-family houses fairly close together because they were built in the 1940s and have sidewalks.

“They also had corner stores and things like that. But the corner shops and the mid-sized grocery stores of around 10,000 square feet closed over time and now shopping is further away because a bigger center opened up a couple of miles out.”

Zimmerman said the distance from his home to the Village at Shirlington is about a mile, which takes him around a 20-minute walk depending on the pace.

And while that isn't an everyday walk, come warmer weather and the diminishing worries of COVID, he said he and his wife plan to stroll downtown to have dinner, see a movie and then “walk back to burn off the extra dessert we had,” he said. “Or, if we are feeling lazy, we can catch a bus or a cab.”

A minority of the country now lives in 15-minute neighborhoods, where you wouldn't need a car and you'd be fine without it being terribly burdensome.



Courtesy of the Village at Shirlington



Photo by Dan Reed



Photo by Dan Reed

The Village at Shirlington in Alexandria, Va.

“There is a lot of grey, however, where there is some walkability and there are certain things you can get. But there is also a whole range of things you can’t reach reliably without taking a car,” Zimmerman said.

“There is a big chunk of the country that are older suburbs or towns that used to be more walkable, because that was how we built everything back then. Now, though, a majority lives in late 20th century suburbs where you have a monoculture of single-family housing and you can’t do much without an automobile.”

Zimmerman said much of the work he does involves data analysis, figuring out where and how walkable, mixed-use projects can be built.

Often, that means redeveloping or replacing malls, altering zoning rules and making other changes.

According to the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® Research Groups’ “2020 Case Studies on Repurposing Vacant Retail Malls,” (available at <https://cdn.nar.realtor/sites/default/files/documents/2020-case-studies-on-repurposing-vacant-retail-malls-05-08-2020.pdf>): “Vacant malls contribute to urban decay, declining property values, and lower tax revenues. Because of these adverse effects, it is important that vacant retail stores are repurposed for other uses. ...

“Careful planning and market assessment of the best uses of the vacant malls are essential. The best use is different for each area. ...”

### Ensuring successful adaptive reuse of malls with data

“Malls are dying or dead all over the place,” Zimmerman said. “We have examples of them being converted to other uses and in some cases being remade entirely, like in Lakewood, Colo. It had one of the biggest indoor shopping malls in the country in the 70s and 80s and it was a big chunk of the tax base in the county west of Denver.

“It went from being really profitable and providing a lot of the sales tax base for the county to going bust in a fairly short period of time. But they took it down and turned the big site of around 100 acres into gridded downtown that they created.”

Zimmerman said data can show how many people live within the “walkshed” of the location being redeveloped. “We use a lot of GIS (geographic information system),

Data can show how many people live within the “walkshed” of the location being redeveloped.

## Analysis shows how much more valuable walkable land is than these drive-only places.

which gives you the data you need with layers associated with the geography. If I change the boundaries, I can tell how many people live there, how many have certain incomes or other characteristics we have in the data base.

“There are also specific geographies created within the GIS that allow you to analyze the differences and the impact on commercial real estate in walkable urban areas, basically walkable places versus the car-dependent, car-only areas.”

In most metro areas, he said only 2 to 5 percent of the land is walkable urban.

“But it carries a huge, disproportional amount of the value,” he said. “When you do the analysis, you really see how much more valuable walkable land is than these drive-only places, where you are talking about the bedroom community, shopping centers and office parks. With this mapping, for example, you see that four percent of the land area in Boston is walkable, but it has 40 percent of the value.”

“That analysis tells you where money wants to go, where there’s return on investment. With a lot of communities, we work with them, looking at their sources of revenue and expenditure with a net impact fiscal analysis. We say if you have new development, depending on where it goes, it will contribute differently to your costs on the one side and the revenue on the other.”

### Data underscores the importance of mixed-use development

Zimmerman said data also shows that single-family neighborhoods that are spread out typically cost more than denser areas to serve because of the costs of putting in infrastructure.

“You annex a bunch of land, put in these high-end developments and you think, ‘great, it’s going to be for affluent people who pay a lot of taxes.’

“But when you run the streets there, it’s a lot of road relative to the taxpayer. And then underground you have to lay the pipes for water and sewer and stormwater. You have to run fire trucks out there and police cars and school buses to pick up kids and trash trucks and all that. When you calculate all this, it turns that many of these very wealthy hooded are often paying less than it costs to serve them.”



Lakewood, Colo.

Photos courtesy of the City of Lakewood, Colo.

If we put things within a quarter mile of people, they're likely to walk.

"That's good data to have which communities often don't use. They just assume it's going to produce a lot of tax revenue and a private developer is going to do this and that's great. So, location matters and data can show that.

"The relative value of different land varies a lot according to factors that are directly related to this concept of 15-minute cities. It is essentially a gradient built on the fact that there is a fundamental human propensity for walking, which is our basic way of locomotion. It says if we put things within a quarter mile of people, they're likely to walk."

But if they are beyond half a mile, they may balk.

"People are individuals, of course, but over an entire population, many are going to do 75 percent of their trips by foot within a quarter mile and that has an implication for the value of the real estate that you'll be walking over.

"That value depends on the mix of uses," he said.

"For instance, you may put in a train station that is within convenient walking distance of my house, which may get me to my job 30 minutes away. I'll probably go by foot back and forth to get on the train.

"But if you have a mix of uses there with shops and services, I can stop by and drop off this or pick up that. So, there is now less reason for me to get in the car to go somewhere else to shop. But it also means you'll have intensely valuable land. That's what happens when you mix the uses and have a level of density, which makes the transit more viable.

"This plays out in ways that affect the economy, health, climate change, equity, all those things based on having mixed-use development within walkable distances and a good, healthy environment that supports that lifestyle."

### Zoning analysis when creating the 15-minute city

Cindy McLaughlin, CEO of Envelope City, uses a different kind of data to help create 15-minute neighborhoods. Envelope's 3D urban mapping software helps real estate professionals visualize and analyze development opportunity under the constraints of zoning.

Working primarily in New York City, she said her company has taken the city's "wildly complex, 4,300-page



zoning code and built it into mapping software that can also aid nonprofits and community organizations.

"The idea is to immediately be able to analyze, see and run scenarios on development potential under the spacial constraints of zoning. The zoning code here is this incredibly technical, very specific block-by-block document and it takes years to build it into software the way we've done it."

McLaughlin is a fan of Carlos Moreno, the urban planner and futurist at the Sorbonne University in Paris who is proselytizing the 15-minute city concept, which advocates turning urban areas back to their earlier roots.

"The idea is to take cities out of the business of mass transit, getting people from one end to the other in a daily commuter rhythm and instead move toward a city of villages," she said.

"That concept works really well in cities like New York or Boston or Philadelphia that are pre-industrial. It gets harder for newer cities that were built to house people outside the center and have them commute in to their work. The infrastructure of the whole city is built differently, but it can be done."

McLaughlin said Envelope City was the creation of SHoP Architects, which spent seven years building a prototype for Manhattan in collaboration with Sarah Williams, an urban planning and technology professor at MIT.



Courtesy of NYC & Company/Jen Davis

McLaughlin described Williams as “one of the world’s leading mapping experts.”

“They spun Envelope out in 2015 when they had a good enough prototype to be useful,” she said. “I came on at that point and since 2016, I’ve brought a technical team around me and we’ve been continuing to evolve, layer more and more relevant rules and expand the geography. We went from Manhattan through all of the five boroughs.”

McLaughlin said her company is focused on the accuracy of the underlying data. It charges \$1,500 for a standard single-lot report with a two-day turnaround and can do a whole neighborhood for a project price.

“We built our own survey-grade parcel maps and we corrected the zoning boundaries that the city puts out, we did our own wide- and narrow-streets database because knowing whether you are on a wide or narrow street is a factor in NYC zoning, which helps you determine development potential and we’ve continued to evolve the underlying model so it is now incredibly correct and very detailed.”



Courtesy of NYC & Company/Jen Davis



Courtesy of NYC & Company/Julienne Schaer

Intensely valuable land happens when you mix the uses and have a level of density.





## Zoning needs a local expert to help with the complexities and understand the area deeply.

She said her company can add additional data to its 3D, SIM City-like maps.

“We can layer on data like where are all the fresh food establishments, the schools, parks, grocery stores for fresh food, offices, light industry and where’s the transit to figure out residents’ daily commutes and what kind of development should be encouraged.”

### Answering complex questions to ensure viable development

Though Envelope City focuses on New York, she said her model could be adapted to other parts of the country.

“But zoning is very bespoke and specific to a given geography. It is possible to do, but you need a local expert to help with the complexities and understand the area deeply so the results you are giving are accurate.

“If someone wants to build something on a given address, they can call us and we give them a clear, accurate and easy-to-understand zoning report with all the information they want and none of the info they don’t care about. And a beautiful visualization of the mapping for that place in context.

“We start to ask big ‘what if’ questions on the multi-block or neighborhood scale. Such as, ‘what would happen if we turn this R5 district into R7, what would that mean for potential commercial development or residential? How might that affect affordability? How many more housing units might we get out of that rezoning? And what would that mean for the schools?’”

Though McLaughlin said many people think of New York City as a mass of skyscrapers, she said it has many low-density areas with single-family houses with yards.

“Almost by definition, they become less like 15-minute neighborhoods because they are all required to have parking. So, everyone is sort of encouraged to have a car, you don’t really get enough density to support thriving commercial districts. And you almost always have to drive to work or take the subway.

“Our policy prescription for New York is to upzone the urban suburbs so they become R3 or R4 districts, where you can have three or four units on every lot. That helps to create the density that allows for a thriving commercial street, new office spaces and other kinds of development.

**Our policy prescription is to upzone the urban suburbs so you can have three or four units on every lot.**



*The former Red Bird Mall in southern Dallas is being redeveloped into a mixed-use, walkable neighborhood with multifamily housing.*

## Data analysis has played a big role in planning the redevelopment.

“I’m optimistic walkable neighborhoods can be created because it seems like the pandemic has created a space for new thinking. A lot of our regulations are sort of stuck in the past, but now there is an appetite to think big.

### Reimagine the old space for a new mix of uses

In Dallas, Texas, real estate developer Terrence Maiden, CEO and managing partner of Russell Glen, is leading a \$200-million “re-imagining” of the former Red Bird Mall in southern Dallas into a mixed-use, walkable neighborhood with multifamily housing, office, hotel and greenspace for public gatherings. It will also include a 150,000-square-foot pediatric medical clinic.

Much of the work on the 90-acre redevelopment in mostly African-American and Latino southern Dallas is scheduled to be completed next year. The effort has earned accolades and was named Project of the Year in 2019 by the Dallas Business Journal.

Maiden said data analysis has played a big role in planning the redevelopment — renamed RedBird — and that his company used a study done by the Urban Land Institute on the property.

“We implemented a lot of the findings in that report in our development plans and held numerous community meetings,” he said. “You just can’t go into something like this without doing research and knowing the lay of the land. We want this to be transformational.”

RedBird will have a new street grid, much of which is being funded by \$28 million in infrastructure grants from the city of Dallas.

Maiden said he was particularly pleased the redevelopment has landed an Atlanta-based company called Chime Solutions, a customer service call center which he hopes will employ up to 1,500 people alone. Other offices and employers could add another 500 jobs, he predicted.

RedBird now has 300 multifamily housing units, a number that could rise to 1,000 over time.

“That’s key to making the redevelopment work,” he said. “We think repopulating the site is key to making it work as a walkable, mixed-use development. And we see other struggling mall sites around the country where this model could work, too.” ●

Brian E. Clark is a Wisconsin-based journalist and a former staff writer on the business desk of The San Diego Union-Tribune. He is a contributor to the Los Angeles Times, Chicago Sun-Times, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Dallas Morning News and other publications.

# ENABLING DENSITY



***“Compactness” is key, but often requires high-quality design for success***

*By Brian E. Clark*

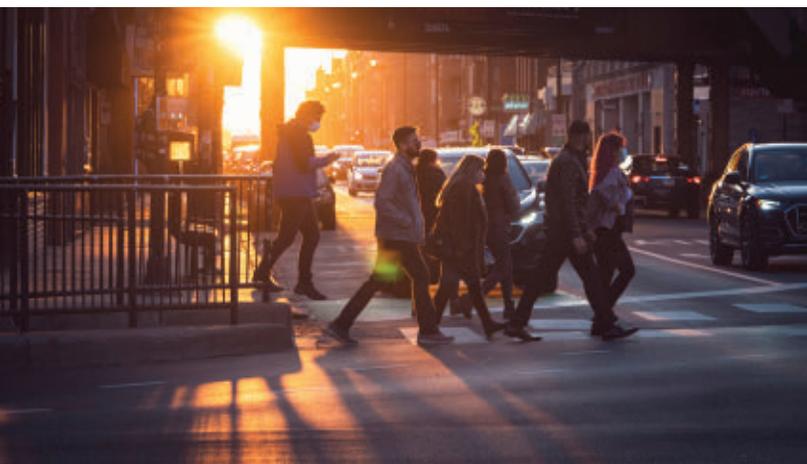
Ed McMahon regularly uses the term “density” in his work, though he’s not a big fan of the term when it comes to creating or re-creating walkable, 15-minute neighborhoods.

“It’s important, of course,” said McMahon, a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute (ULI) in Washington, D.C. “But it’s not necessarily the most important thing.”

McMahon would prefer to use the word “compactness” rather than density because he believes the latter term has a negative connotation for many people.

Regardless of which term you employ, he extolls compact communities as great places to live because they are often “where you have a mix of uses and housing types, locally owned businesses that meet your needs and other necessities,” said McMahon, who lives in the walkable neighborhood of Tacoma Park, Md., outside of Washington, D.C.

“We’ve known for a long time that it is very costly for cities to spread things around further apart,” he said. “For years, even though household sizes have been shrinking, the amount of land used by each household was increasing. And at the same time, we segregated all uses and you



Compact communities are great places to live because you have a mix of uses and housing types.

## Density demands high-quality design first and foremost.

had to drive everywhere for everything. So, people were spending more time driving longer distances.”

McMahon said density demands high-quality design first and foremost. When he worked for Maryland Gov. Parris Glendening on the state’s Smart Growth program, he said one of the things “we learned about density was that you can’t just stick more look-alike houses together and expect everyone to like them.

“Density demands compensating amenities, such as sidewalks and neighborhood parks and play areas and bicycle paths. And, it demands access to green space because if your yard is smaller, it means the public areas will need to be bigger.”

Density also means giving people choices for getting around. “You could have a lot of density, but you might still have to drive everywhere if you didn’t have choices like transit and bikeways, as well as nice places to walk. So, walkability and bikeability go hand in hand,” he said.

Density doesn’t need to be everywhere. “I’d say good density is focused, well-designed, contextual, walkable, improves neighborhoods and is soulful, while bad density is scattered, poorly designed, not contextual, is auto-centered, degrades communities and is soulless. In fact, many of America’s most charming and high-value neighborhoods are relatively dense,” he added, citing Georgetown, in Washington, D.C., and Old Town in Alexandria, Va.

McMahon said one of his pet peeves with a lot of new housing is when developers pay little or no attention to the vernacular of an area. “Great neighborhoods accommodate locally owned businesses of arts, culture and food. They don’t just have chains.”

### Infill strategies

Revitalizing a blighted neighborhood takes time, according to the Center for Community Progress, a 10-year-old organization that focuses on “turning vacant spaces into vibrant places.”

That means small steps that might include offering pop-up libraries and creating green spaces where buildings once stood, while the neighborhoods are revitalized.

Community Progress has partnered with the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® through a program called “Transforming Neighborhoods” to help local groups receive NAR-financed technical and other assistance.

The program aids community leaders — including REALTORS®, city officials, nonprofits and others — in their efforts to revitalize abandoned properties and turn neglected areas into neighborhoods that meet many of their residents’ needs.

“We fight systemic vacancy,” said Jovan Hackley, director of communications for Community Progress. “We deal not simply with just one empty house on the block, but with all the laws and decisions that led to the building in a neighborhood being abandoned.



Courtesy of BeyondDC

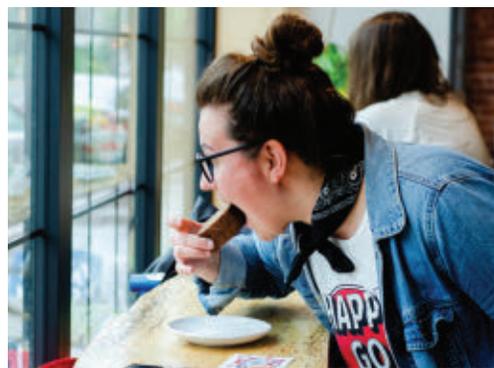


Courtesy of BeyondDC

Tacoma Park, Md.



Georgetown, Washington, D.C.



## Great neighborhoods also accommodate locally owned businesses of arts, culture and food.

“We fight displacement and disparities to create communities that aren’t just full, but have assets for the existing residents. That’s the complete cycle of property revitalization.”

Community Progress does this primarily through land banks, which obtain properties at low or no cost through the tax foreclosure process. There were only six land banks when the organization was created in 2010, but that number has since grown to 200.

In a nutshell, land banks are government entities or nonprofit corporations focused on conversion of vacant, abandoned and tax-delinquent properties — which can destabilize neighborhoods — into productive use. Land banks, which often have special powers, are used to acquire title to problem properties, eliminate liabilities and transfer properties to new, responsible owners in a

transparent manner that results in outcomes consistent with community-based plans.

“But we’ve also expanded into code enforcement and partnerships with important communities, of which real estate agents are some of the most vital,” Hackley added.

Liz Kozub, associate director for Leadership & Education at Community Progress, said sometimes abandoned properties are turned into gardens and pocket parks to improve neighborhoods.

“We look at green spaces as assets for communities,” she said. “So, if we are talking about comprehensive, holistic communities, there should be tools and resources to transition those properties to places to better complement community goals such as placemaking projects. That fits into the 15-minute neighborhood concept.”

Community Progress did a series of 20 blog posts last spring around what Hackley called “creative placemaking on problem properties,” that included setting everything from neighborhood gardens to pop-up grocery stores or pop-up libraries in both urban and rural communities.

Kozub said pop-ups are traditionally used to provide a type of excitement and inspiration and to fill a need on a temporary basis. But she noted that they can also move

Locate density and multifamily housing near transit lines and in underperforming commercial corridors, which have been overbuilt in suburban America.

a property in the direction of a more permanent re-use in line with community goals.

Hackley said Community Progress is backing the Neighborhood Homes Investment Act, which is part of this Administration's "American Jobs Plan." It would give investors a federal tax break if there is a shortfall in the value of a property after it has been revitalized.

An example would be an abandoned property that cost \$60,000. If a buyer put \$100,000 into restoration, but the value was still only \$120,000, he or she could reap a tax benefit.

Community Progress is also supporting the federal "Restoring Communities Left Behind Act," which would make \$5 billion available to local communities through a grant program administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. It would fund neighborhood revitalization activities, including homeowner rehabilitation assistance, weatherization, improved housing accessibility for seniors and people with disabilities, housing counseling, refinancing, property tax relief, and more.

So where else would you want to think about putting density? There are a few key locations. One is near large transit investments, like transit lines, and the other big places — and one of the easiest places — is along underperforming commercial corridors, which have been completely overbuilt in suburban-retail-strip America and that was happening even before the pandemic.

"That's where multifamily housing is going. Single-family neighborhoods are always objecting to putting multifamily buildings in their neighborhoods. Well, you don't have to do that if using struggling strip malls. And you've already got the infrastructure there. You've got sewer and water and it's on a four-lane road typically," McMahan said.

He believes the future belongs to mixed-use, 15-minute neighborhoods. And that cities and developers are



Courtesy of BeyondDC



Courtesy of BeyondDC

Savannah, Ga.





Courtesy of Montgomery County



Courtesy of Kentlands; Photo by Andrew Bossi

Kentlands, Gaithersburg, Md.

becoming more creative. Some cities are now putting affordable housing on fire stations and libraries. “That cuts costs because 20 percent of the cost of housing is land. Right across the street from the new ULI offices is a new fire station with 40 units of housing on top.”

McMahon emphasized that there is no “one-size-fits-all” formula for creating 15-minute neighborhoods that are successful. “The best developers start off analyzing the site and try to learn from the place. That is how you create value. If you can’t differentiate your real estate project in the world we live in today, you will have no competitive advantage. In fact, many REALTORS® have said, the ‘place’ is becoming more important than the ‘product.’ What’s going on outside of the house

People are willing to spend 10 percent more for homes in walkable neighborhoods.

always has more impact on the value of a piece of property than what’s going on inside the house. The character of a neighborhood is always more important than granite countertops in the house, which is why sidewalks, context, bike lanes, accessible transit, schools, businesses, grocery stores and things like that are so important.”

### Accessibility premium

Bob Myers, a team leader for the RE/MAX Realty Services in Rockville, Md., said people are willing to spend 10 percent more for homes in the upscale, walkable Kentlands neighborhood of Gaithersburg.

“People are willing to pay a premium to live here because it is compact and has a lively energy,” explained Myers, who said the community has a mix of condominiums, apartments, an over-55 building, townhomes and single-family houses. It also has a number of small businesses, a post office, restaurants, salons, a movie theater, grocery, a school, a couple of small lakes and a brewery.

“It has its own unique feel to it and people who live here really like the convenience of it,” added Myers, who said Kentlands won awards when it was started in the late 1980s as one of the first urban-suburban, walkable neighborhoods.

“Things are pretty close together and that was the point of having a neighborhood that had sidewalks and would be a nice place to walk to things that people need and want to do. On weekends in the summer, there are bands that play in the courtyard, where residents like to hang out. It has all the attributes of an upscale area. It works.”

In Bremerton, Wash., the story is a little different.

### Revitalization of vacant property

Located on the west side of Puget Sound, Bremerton’s downtown is on the rebound from a decades-long slump, said Wes Larson, CEO of the Sound West Group, a full-service real estate company and developer.

“For a long time, this town was everyone’s poster child for revitalization in the Northwest,” said Larson, who grew up in Bremerton and is the son of a naval shipyard worker. He later lived in New York City and Vienna, Austria.

“It’s historically been a blue-collar town and currently has a population of around 40,000,” he said. “The Navy base and the shipyard have been the backbone for the economy. But back in the day, when things weren’t going so well, it was called ‘Bummertown.’”



“Having lived in New York, what inspired me about coming back to Bremerton is that I think it could become Seattle’s Brooklyn, which went from being blue collar to very urban and hip and a preferred place to live outside the city. I see a lot of parallels.”

Larson said he thinks density is extremely important to the revitalization of downtown Bremerton because compact housing will “serve local needs for workers’ housing for employers like the Shipyard, as well as spur more retail and service businesses downtown.

“Density will also benefit and feed off — and from — the transit connections like the ferries to Seattle. It will create the synergies for job growth, as well as activating redevelopment of older buildings and repurposing them to more productive uses. All this will attract greater activity, investment and more growth.”

Larson’s company has been involved with redeveloping Bremerton’s downtown for a number of years to make it more walkable and attractive to residents and visitors. Sound West Group’s current effort is the \$135-million Marina Square, which will have three floors of parking and add more housing to the downtown.

“Marina Square is the key project, centrally located on the waterfront, next to the ferry terminals, hotels, conference center and restaurants,” he said, noting that it will also have “attractive open space.”

Density is extremely important to the revitalization of downtown.



Bremerton, Wash.



## The city changed the zoning to allow for not just commercial, but multifamily housing downtown.

Much of the waterfront has already been transformed with a ferry terminal that opened in 2000 — where commuters can take a 60-minute car ferry or a 30-minute passenger ferry to Seattle — a conference center and condos, which was a public effort by the Port of Bremerton, the Housing Authority and private developers leading the way. Bus service is also available a short walk away at the Bremerton Transportation Center.

Marina Square, which will have two towers with 280 units and includes workforce housing, overlooks Puget Sound and is going up on a two-acre former parking lot. Larson called it the “last and most choice development parcel there.”

Sound West has already converted the old Sears department store and Ford dealership in downtown Bremerton into multi-housing. It also restored the Roxy Theater.

“What was key was that the city changed the zoning to allow for not just commercial, but multifamily housing downtown and that allowed us to develop to demand. The city is now working on Quincy Square, which will honor music icon and Bremerton native Quincy Jones.”

Before the changes beginning around 2000, Larson said Bremerton was a “classic urban ghost town.

“When the Kitsap Mall happened [nine miles north of town in Silverdale], retail departed and there were a lot of derelict buildings left behind. The ones we repurposed were vacant for 35 years. But they are only a block from the waterfront and on the Quincy Square.

“There are still some unoccupied buildings, so this is a work in progress. There is demand for people living downtown. For us, it’s just finding the opportunities that pencil out. The city is very supportive.

“Honestly, it’s finding the properties to work on. We are the main redeveloper of downtown. The problem is that some owners are just sitting on their buildings and asking outrageous prices.”

Larson said he believes Bremerton will boom, in part because the Navy — which now has 15,000 employees in the area — is planning \$5 billion of improvements in its facilities starting in 2024.

“This is where I’m from and where my partner is from,” he said. “We believe in Bremerton and what it can become.”

### Prioritizing people, not cars

Rachel Quednau is program manager for Strong Towns — an organization whose primary goal is to make communities financially resilient. She said the big question for re-creating successful downtowns and walkable, 15-minute neighborhoods often depends on the condition of the community to start with.

“It’s a lot easier to transition an area that has buildings that are pretty close together, has sidewalks and businesses



## Building car-centric communities isn't a wise financial choice.

that are already there,” she said. “It’s a lot easier to move that sort of neighborhood in the direction of being more of a fully 15-minute neighborhood by increasing housing options, creating spaces for more businesses and filling in the gaps.

“Conversely, it’s more difficult if your starting place is mostly winding residential streets with very wide roads, no sidewalks, cul de sacs and large, big box stores and scattered malls.”

But wherever communities are starting, she said the key is to think about making things more human scale, orienting the space towards people rather than cars by promoting sidewalks and bike lanes.

“We suggest looking at what is already successful and building from there. Ideally, you’ll be able to fill in with housing, and businesses like a grocery store, drug store, doctors’ offices and transit to make that a complete, 15-minute hood.”

Quednau said Strong Towns stays away from any specific “prescribed formulas or any density percentages because every space is different. So, it depends. I’ve seen very small towns that have successful, walkable neighborhoods with only a few thousand residents or even a few hundred people living there.

“The biggest thing to avoid is continuing to prioritize cars over people. That means not putting in huge parking lots and not mandating excessive parking for different sorts of businesses and residential areas and not building anything more than two-lane streets.

“It also means really pushing for sidewalks and curb bumpouts so that street crossings are easy and safe for pedestrians. And making things human scale, not having huge, one-story, one-use buildings that take up a ton of space.

“Unfortunately, there continue to be many new auto-focused, suburban subdivisions cropping up around the country. But there are also many bright spots around the United States where you find attractive, financially resilient and walkable communities that have the things people want and need beyond businesses and restaurants — from houses of worship to libraries to schools and parks.”

Strong Towns believes building car-centric communities isn’t a wise financial choice.

“Having residential and commercial spaces that have the highest productive value per taxable acre is a better plan,” she said. “We encourage places that have a strong economy where local businesses can thrive and entrepreneurs can get started, where people can meet their daily needs within their communities and not have to drive out to the Walmart or some other big box store on the edge of town to get what they need. That makes a lot more sense.” ●

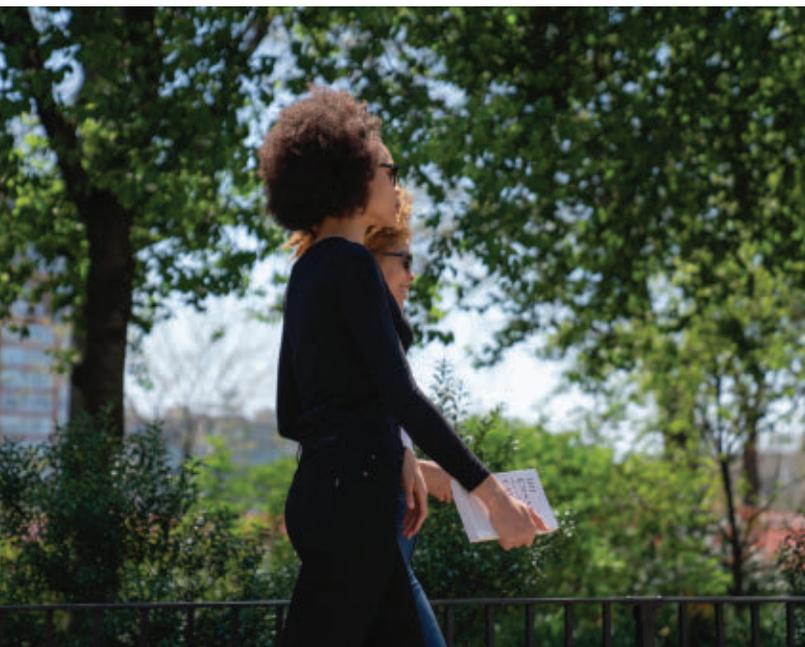
Brian E. Clark is a Wisconsin-based journalist and a former staff writer on the business desk of The San Diego Union-Tribune. He is a contributor to the Los Angeles Times, Chicago Sun-Times, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Dallas Morning News and other publications.





AFFORDABLE

# Walkability



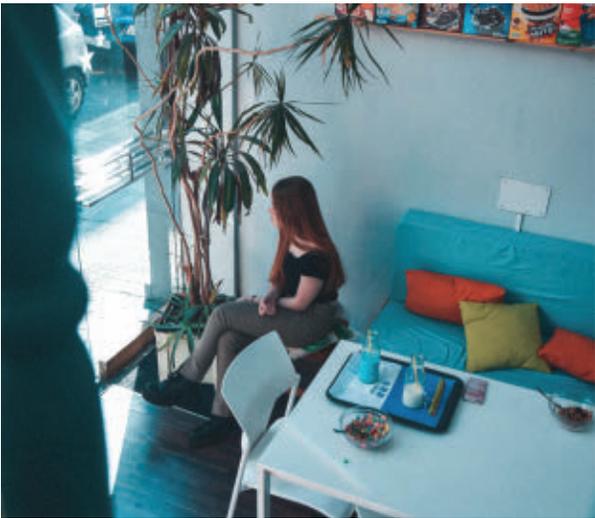
*By Brad Broberg*

Walking is free. But walkability? That will cost you.

As walkable urban living continues to gain popularity, cities are struggling to boost the amount of housing in their core residential districts where single-family zoning locks low density in place.

This is where the dream of the 15-minute city — where people can stroll to stores, restaurants and other everyday destinations — meets the law of supply and demand.

Although 15-minute living was baked into many neighborhoods decades ago during their original development, most core residential districts long ago exhausted their capacity to grow. With inventory frozen, housing prices are soaring.



“The status quo is completely broken in terms of affordability,” said Dan Bertolet, director of research, urban planning and housing at the Sightline Institute, a Seattle think tank focused on sustainability.

Austin is a prime example. The inventory of homes for sale citywide dwindled to a scant two-week supply earlier this year compared to the six-month supply that indicates a balanced market, said Greg Anderson, director of community affairs for Austin Habitat for Humanity.

As a result, the median price of a home — which recently topped \$400,000 — is no longer affordable to an Austin family of four earning the median income of \$97,600, based on the rule of thumb that a buyer can afford to pay about three times their earnings. “It’s a disaster,” Anderson said.

Codes are overdue for an overhaul that would support more diverse and affordable housing.

The problem isn’t so much a lack of new construction. The problem is that the new construction isn’t producing much of a net gain in core neighborhoods — the result of a zoning code that allows only single-family homes in those areas.

“We have a lot of redevelopment happening ... but we’re getting a lot of one-for-one replacement,” Anderson said. “You have one house that’s bought for \$800,000, they tear it down, they build a new home and they sell it for \$1.8 million. And that’s happening all over our [core] neighborhoods.”

Back in the day, Austin, Texas, allowed duplexes, triplexes and the like in those neighborhoods, but that changed when the city adopted a new exclusionary zoning code in 1984. Many people think the code is overdue for an overhaul that would once again support a more diverse and affordable range of housing types in core neighborhoods.

“Until [then] there’s just going to be unbelievable amounts of displacement, and sprawl and unaffordability because we’re simply unable to build the amount of housing and the types of housing we’re so desperate to build,” Anderson said.

While revamping the zoning code is a contentious political process that has dragged on since 2012, the city took an important step to address its overall housing crunch when it launched the Affordability Unlocked program in 2019.

The citywide program loosens regulations on height, density, parking, compatibility and other development limitations for developers who include a high percentage of affordable apartment, condo or townhome units. The city reported certifying applications for 2,721 units as of September 2020 — 2,337 of them deemed affordable for those earning below 60 percent (renters) or 80 percent (buyers) of median-family income.

“It’s been a tremendous success,” Anderson said. “We and most other nonprofits and even for-profit affordable housing builders in Austin are definitely taking advantage of it and working toward using it more so in the future.”

Portland, Ore., once faced the same problem with exclusionary zoning like Austin, but now allows multiple units of housing on a single lot throughout the city — even in core neighborhoods previously zoned exclusively for single-family homes. The change takes effect later this year. While it puts Portland at the forefront of zoning reform nationwide, allowing multiple units on a single residential lot is nothing more than going back to the future.



“That’s a historic pattern,” said Joe Zehnder, chief planner with the city’s Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. “That’s how this town was built in the streetcar era, but we moved away from that. Now we are trying to move back to it.”

The changes come after the state Legislature required small cities to allow duplexes on single-family lots and large cities to allow four-plexes — with Portland going a step further by allowing six-plexes if at least half of the units are affordable to low-income residents.

Portland also revised commercial zoning to allow more housing in and around the local business districts that anchor core neighborhoods — a move that not only relieves pressure on housing supply and affordability but also expands the customer base for area merchants. The city also began prioritizing core neighborhoods when awarding funds from its affordable housing budget.

“We’re mixing it up so you have an increasingly broad range of types of units, size of units and price points in those places that already have a lot of assets,” explained Zehnder. “A lot of those [assets] like parks and schools and walkable streets are, in part, the result of past investments by the city and private development ... so we want to get the most out of that.”

Portland revised commercial zoning to allow more housing in and around local business districts.

But even when cities get the most out of their core neighborhoods, affordability can be a relative term. “These are high-demand and high-amenity neighborhoods,” Zehnder said. “It’s hard to [provide] affordable housing in these communities.”

That’s why Portland hopes to give newer areas of the city — former unincorporated suburbs where housing is more affordable but the amenities found in core neighborhoods are lacking — a makeover.

“In those kinds of places, we’re trying to bring more characteristics of the [15-minute city] so that those households have access to them,” Zehnder said. “And the main way we’re going to accomplish this is through private development supported by public investment ... in things like parks and walkable streets and transit.”

It’s one thing to allow multiplexes on single-family lots, but that doesn’t guarantee they will get built or be “attainably” priced if the number of allowable units is too low, warned architect Daniel Parolek, founding principal of Opticos Design in Berkeley, Calif.

Lots are so costly in many core neighborhoods that the investment — acquiring the property and in most cases tearing down an existing single-family home — must be spread across as many units as possible in order for builders to turn a profit at lower price points. Without that flexibility, builders may decide it makes more sense to simply build a seven-figure McMansion.

“Competing with the big expensive house is a real challenge,” Parolek said. “You need to make sure you’re allowing enough units.”

The threshold varies from city to city depending on property values. “In a place like Berkeley, it may take a six-plex or an eight-plex to deliver any sort of any attainability on one of these lots. In a lower-value market, the four-plex may be able to deliver an attainable rental or sale price,” Parolek said.

Parolek, who specializes in designing and planning walkable urban environments, coined the term “missing middle” to describe the multiplexes, garden apartments and cottage clusters that were woven into many core neighborhoods during their birth but are rarely built anymore because of exclusionary zoning.

“I call it hidden density,” said Parolek, author of “Missing Middle Housing: Thinking Big and Building Small to Respond to Today’s Housing Crisis.”

Form-based codes give developers more leeway to choose how many units to include within the allowable envelope.

As cities ponder how to unlock that hidden density — the backbone of 15-minute neighborhoods — Parolek advises using form-based codes that focus more on the maximum building envelope rather than conventional codes that focus more on the maximum unit count.

“If a developer can only deliver four units on a lot, they’re going to deliver the biggest and most expensive units they can deliver on that site,” Parolek explained. However, if the code gives developers more leeway to choose how many units to include within the allowable envelope, they could opt to build eight studio units rather than four one-bedroom units — a win-win for supply and affordability.

“That sounds super-logical, but [conventional] zoning is set up in a way that disincentivizes smaller units,” Parolek said.

Seattle took a step in the right direction by making it easier for homeowners to build accessory dwelling units



## AFFORDABLE HOUSING *Legislation*

Maryland is among many states where housing prices and inventories are giving buyers and renters serious heartburn. That’s why the Maryland REALTORS® association is joining with other groups to push legislation to increase housing supply and affordability in their state.

“We’ve seen prices escalate and inventory is lower than it’s been in a very long time,” said Bill Castelli, senior vice president of government affairs with Maryland REALTORS®. “Our concern is if we don’t start to chip away at it right now, it will eventually become too big of a problem to solve.”

The bills, which supporters hope to bring to the state Legislature next year, propose a variety of strategies to resolve the housing crunch in Maryland. They include:

- Legalizing accessory dwelling units throughout the state based on standards developed by individual counties.
- Requiring every county to show in its comprehensive plan how it intends to meet future housing needs.
- Mandating that any loss of potential residential units that occurs as a result of downzoning a piece of property be offset by a gain of potential units elsewhere.
- Encouraging mixed-use redevelopment — including housing — in underused commercial centers. The methods remain under discussion, but range from allowing residential units outright to creating a universal density variance to awarding density bonuses.

“The housing supply is stressed,” Castelli said. “We just want to keep putting these ideas out there to legislators ... so we can hopefully make the housing supply a priority.”



Photo is courtesy of the Building an ADU website (<https://www.buildinganadu.com>), which offers resources for planning, designing and building ADUs.

(ADUs) — granny suites, garage apartments, backyard cottages — in more of the city’s single-family neighborhoods. Bertolet calls it the most progressive ADU policy in the country because it allows for two ADUs per single-family home. The policy also limits most new single-family homes to 2,500 square feet in order to save room for ADUs — which tend to rent for below market rate — and discourage construction of expensive McMansions that consume entire lots.

The next step for Seattle is to allow missing middle housing — multiplexes, townhouses and small apartment buildings — in all residential zones, Bertolet said.

The missing middle represents the lack of choice found between single-family homes at one end of the housing market and large multifamily buildings at the other. But it also represents the lack of choice found between housing for people with below-average incomes and housing for people with above-average incomes.

Boulder, Colo., is known for its progressive approach to providing affordable housing at the low end of the range, but has yet to crack the code for the middle range, where developers cannot tap into government programs to subsidize their costs.

“In a place like Boulder where land values are so high, providing missing-middle housing is a tremendous challenge,” said Jacob Lindsey, director of planning and development. “We will need to innovate in [ways] we haven’t before, simply because low-income-housing, tax-credit programs don’t exist for the missing middle. It’s the next thing on our plate.”

Boulder is guided by a housing strategy that lists diverse housing choices and 15-minute neighborhoods among its goals. “Boulder is already a very compact city as a result of its comprehensive planning efforts over many years,”

Lindsey said “The creation of 15-minute neighborhoods is the next logical step in its planning legacy.”

The signs of progress include three neighborhoods where planning and zoning updates support mixed-use development at previously languishing locations. Construction is already underway at Boulder Junction, a transit-oriented development where numerous local and regional bus routes converge. Construction is expected to begin soon at Alpine-Balsam, the site of an old hospital the city purchased and demolished. Still on the drawing board is East Boulder, where the city is working with the community to create a transit-oriented redevelopment plan.

Ingrid Gould Ellen calls that approach the “low-hanging fruit” when it comes to cultivating 15-minute living. “Mixed-use zoning is at the core of building a city or neighborhood where people can live, work and play,” said Ellen, professor of Urban Policy and Planning at New York University. “The key ... is aligning zoning along transit corridors.”

Boulder’s quest to become a 15-minute city includes investing in pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure such as a multi-use pathway — separate from the sidewalks and bike lanes that line the city’s streets — that runs from one end of town to the other. “It’s like having a whole other network that connects the city in that 15-minute community type of way,” said Erika Vandenbrande, Boulder’s director of transportation and mobility.

That’s also the goal of the Atlanta Beltline, a multi-use trail being built within a former rail corridor that encircles the city. When completed, it will connect 45 core neighborhoods and increase their access to parks and Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) rail stations.

While the beltline is spurring redevelopment in places that experienced decades of disinvestment, there is a downside to the resurgence. “Because people love the beltline and want to be close to it, it’s had this unintended consequence of becoming a vehicle for gentrification and

**Working together, land trusts and land banks provide a structure to ensure housing stays affordable for generations.**

displacement,” said Amanda Rhein, executive director of the Atlanta Land Trust. “We at the Atlanta Land Trust try to mitigate some of that ... so longtime residents can remain in place as property values increase.”

Land trusts are nonprofit organizations that acquire property for a variety of community-driven purposes — including creating lasting affordable housing in high-demand neighborhoods.

When people buy a home through a land trust, they own the home but lease the land from the trust. When they sell, they gain only a portion of the home’s appreciation, which helps the land trust ensure the home remains affordable to the next buyer and the next buyer and the next buyer.

Land trusts often obtain property from land banks. Land banks are public authorities created to hold, manage and develop tax delinquent, abandoned and dilapidated properties to ensure they are transferred into productive use.

The Atlanta Land Bank is one of the Atlanta Land Trust’s primary partners. By providing land at a discount, land banks help land trusts keep their development costs down so they can price homes affordably.

Working together, land trusts and land banks provide a structure to ensure housing stays affordable for generations, said Paul Singh, vice president of community initiatives at NeighborWorks America, a network of affordable housing advocates based in Washington, D.C.

“This ensures that long-time residents and residents with low-incomes have opportunities to live and thrive in the neighborhood even if property values rise significantly or other forces of displacement come into play,” he said.

Right now, the Atlanta Land Trust has 20 homes in its portfolio, but its five-year goal is 300 homes — both near the beltline and in other parts of the city. “What we’re trying to do is put housing in places where people have access to opportunity. That’s the bottom line for us,” Rhein said. “Some of that is basic amenities that anybody would like to have in their neighborhood, but more broadly it’s about people having access to jobs, education, health care through transportation — either MARTA or the beltline.”

Brad Broberg is a Seattle-based freelance writer specializing in business and development issues. His work appears regularly in the Puget Sound Business Journal and the Seattle Daily Journal of Commerce. ●



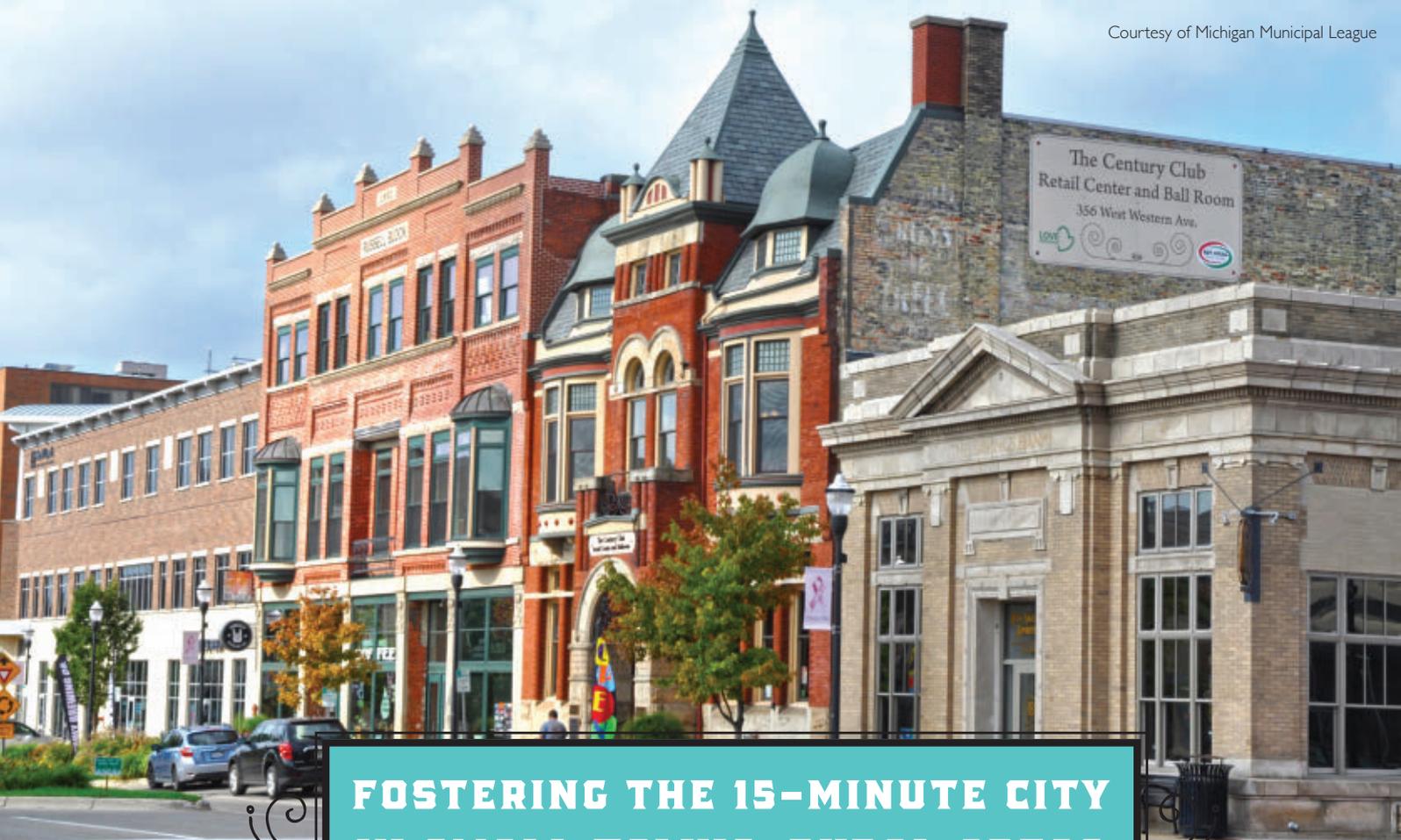
Photo by wyliepoon on flickr



Photo by Ethan Trewitt on flickr

*Pictured above is the Atlanta Beltline, a multi-use trail being developed in a former rail corridor that encircles the city.*





## FOSTERING THE 15-MINUTE CITY IN SMALL TOWNS, RURAL AREAS AND SUBURBIA

*“Put the stuff closer together so it’s easier to get to the stuff.”*

By Kurt Buss

This is how Minneapolis planner Paul Mogush describes the 15-minute city concept, which is getting refreshed attention, though it’s hardly a novel method of designing the places where we live. It used to be the status quo in many small towns and rural communities before urban flight and improved highways lead to the advent of suburbia, big box stores and malls; so, we don’t need to start from scratch.

“The 15-minute city is just the latest restatement of what more and more planners, leaders, and everyday people have been realizing, which is that traditional small-town

development was elegant, efficient, and beneficial, and that the modern auto-oriented landscape that we’ve moved into has serious drawbacks,” says Tracy Hadden Loh, a fellow with the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Center for Transformative Placemaking at the Brookings Institution.

I know this, having grown up in a small farm town [pop. 250] in central Wisconsin in the 1960s. It once was vibrant, boasting two grocery stores, a community bank, feed mill, cheese factory, farm implement, hardware store, tavern and a ballroom big enough to hold weddings and rock shows. All that is gone now. Rusted-out cars cover the scars where these buildings once stood.

It's a shame. But, there is hope. In many instances, the chickens are coming home to roost. There's even a phone app that enables anyone to type in an address and see how that neighborhood meets the criteria for a 15-minute city, available at <https://app.developer.here.com/15-min-city-map/>, by HERE Technologies.

In a recent Wall Street Journal story, [March 12, 2021] "Small Town Natives Are Moving Back Home," it was pointed out that, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, 52 percent of adults age 18 to 29 lived with their parents in 2020, the largest share since the Great Depression according to Pew Research Center, and that U.S. Census Bureau data has indicated many large metro areas have seen declining growth, and in some cases population losses since 2020.

Telecommuting has lessened the need to drive to a brick-and-mortar office building, reducing stress on overburdened commuter conduits and greenhouse gas emissions, giving people greater choice in where they call home. Quality of life issues make fresh air and fewer urban grievances — from road rage to violent crime — appealing to families seeking a healthy, safer place to raise their children. As the farmer, poet and essayist Wendell Berry said, "No matter how much one may love the world as a whole, one can live fully in it only by living responsibly in some small part of it."

Leaving a small town, rural area or the suburbs to see other parts of the world will always be an enticement for many, as it was for me. Drawing residents back has been difficult as America flipped from being roughly 80 percent rural and 20 percent urban at the beginning of the 20th century to 80 percent urban and 20 percent rural by the end; but the pendulum is always in motion. Urban decentralization and getting away from car-centric city design is putting more focus on walkable communities as well as meeting the desires of today's homeowners. A recent NAR community preference study found that

Quality of life issues make fresh air and fewer urban grievances appealing to families seeking a healthy, safer place to raise their children.



## Walkable, complete neighborhoods are the desire for new homeowners.

85 percent surveyed said that “sidewalks are a positive factor when purchasing a home, and 79 percent place importance on being within easy walking distance of places.”

Helen D. Johnson, president of the Michigan Municipal League Foundation, has seen how important the notions of proximity and participation are to creating vibrant, inclusive, economically healthy and culturally wealthy communities, and what the parameters are for making this a reality.

“In order for the reality of a 15-minute community to be made real for residents, our local government leaders need to be intentional about understanding what their needs and wants are. Key questions should be asked, such as ‘How can communities co-locate opportunities for healthy living and health care, for education and entertainment, and for food and arts, and other essential amenities?’ And, ‘How might we support local businesses and organizations to provide these amenities sustainably and in a way that provides stable jobs for locals?’ We are supporters of the concept of community wealth building and the effort to share prosperity for all in ways that enhance the human experience. Communities of all shapes and sizes can aspire to achieve community wealth building by creating trust, being collaborative, and by listening to their residents. In the end, it comes

down to reaching common ground and realizing we all want the same thing — prosperity.”

But there are obstacles to drawing and retaining residents in small communities and suburbs. Loh identified the primary hurdles. “We have built almost nothing except auto-oriented sprawl for several generations now, and so much of the real estate industry is streamlined to deliver this product, especially in terms of financing. We have to re-learn how to build something else.

“Also, zoning regulatory regimes actually prohibit the kind of walkable, traditional neighborhoods that embody the 15-minute city in most places in the United States. And, we have a lot of obsolete legacy buildings and infrastructure that are literally physically in the way of creating 15-minute neighborhoods, and we have to figure out how to rehabilitate and retrofit that stuff — and how to pay for that work.”

Walkable, complete neighborhoods are not only the desire for new homeowners, but equally important to us baby boomers looking to enjoy what used to be described as the Golden Years. AARP has been active in the concept through its Livable Communities initiative and coined the phrase “20-minute village.” (We boomers walk a little slower and are easily distracted, thus the additional five minutes.)

AARP’s Livable Communities Director Danielle Arigoni, an urban planner by education with more than 20 years of professional experience, including leadership positions at the EPA and HUD, explains: “I think at its root it’s really about increasing choice, and being more mindful of how we design communities so that you can live well without needing to get behind the wheel of a car, which comports very well with what we’re trying to do with our Livable Communities initiative. We’re really about working with communities and supporting local leaders to expand choice in housing and transportation and design places that put the needs for older adults first in the belief that when you do that you actually get to solutions that really benefit people of all ages.

“What we see rural communities doing is taking on place-making opportunities, where they’re thinking differently about carving out some parking spaces and turning those into little after-dining or parklet situations. We’re seeing more communities recognize that what they need in order to bring people back downtown is maybe more benches or better lighting or wayfinding. And all of these



Courtesy of USDA; Photo by Preston Keres

small incremental investments can be done under the age-friendly banner, but the same assets are obviously of value to everyone.”

Strong Towns is a major player in advocating for change in the way urban design can support economic strength and resiliency in less populated locales and suburbs. Its Senior Editor Daniel Herriges discussed how the 15-minute city concept can benefit small towns and rural communities.

“What a small town has working in its favor is that it was designed around people walking. It has storefronts and maybe a park or town square with a gazebo. Neighborhoods are close by. It’s a place that is inherently adaptable to a lifestyle where you walk out your door and you’ve really got the village right there. And I think a small town also often has a sense of identity and community — that a suburb might not necessarily have — where the community is the locus of people’s lives.”

Strong Towns reported on the inexpensive development of an unused downtown space in “Low-Cost Pop-Up Shops Create Big Value in Muskegon, Michigan” [pop. 38,000] where funds derived from the chamber of commerce, a community foundation and other organizations paid for the construction of 12 wooden buildings ranging from 90-150 square feet at a cost of just \$5,000 to \$6,000 per “chalet.” Small businesses and startups were able to co-locate in an area that brought shoppers back to an untenanted commercial lot and allowed them an affordable entry to operate, in some cases being a stepping stone to moving into a larger storefront. The city has since taken over funding of future pop-up chalets.

“The broader notion of just being willing to lower the bar for what’s the smallest best next step you can take I think is really, really powerful,” Herriges says. “And that’s what they did there, they said we’ve got this land the city’s sitting on and that it owns in our downtown, and there isn’t developer interest in it right now to build a whole big building on it, but we don’t have to let it sit idle in the meantime when there’s something we can do such as a little pop-up use that would begin to draw people into that space. This isn’t something for just the built-up cores of major cities. It applies in rural areas very much, too.”

Small steps, such as pop-up shops, draw people to downtowns.



Photos courtesy of Michigan Municipal League

## Building partnerships and intentional community engagement are key.

The National Main Street Center is another active player in small town preservation and revitalization, working to join various municipal and civic organizations to collaborate on projects bringing new life to less-populated communities. Lindsey Wallace, director of Strategic Projects and Design Services, told “On Common Ground” how the 15-minute city concept aligns with its efforts.

“Building partnerships and intentional community engagement are key, particularly as these concepts often necessitate thoughtful physical and infrastructural changes. This is true in communities of all sizes, but particularly in small towns and rural communities, where people wear many hats and may be in the same positions for long tenures.



Courtesy of Michigan Municipal League



“We often encourage local leaders to get to know their local planning department, public works, and parks and recreation staff as well as their state departments of transportation so that when an opportunity comes to adopt new policy or try out a complete streets project, you have already built trust and camaraderie. Similarly, consistent, intentional public engagement better connects local leaders with small business owners, residents, and anchor institutions like community colleges and libraries, so local leaders can ascertain and address concerns over changes necessary to achieve 15-minute city concepts — such as conversion of parking.”

While small towns and rural communities are more inclined to be able to offer greater variety in a tighter space through inherent mixed-use zoning in downtown areas, suburbs are a different matter.

“Suburbs are the hardest area to address because of the strict zoning limitations around residential uses only,” Arigoni says. “Subdivisions are really challenging, but I don’t think we can write them off, obviously, because so many people live there. I think the most incremental thing we can do towards that is allow for more diversity of housing in those areas and start with diversifying the housing stock, because that will allow different kinds of people to live there and will allow people to remain there once they no longer have children to raise, for example, but they don’t want to leave their four-bedroom house because they love their neighbors and their community, the social activities and their church is nearby, or whatever.

“What are the options we’re making available to those people in a suburban community? Once more varied housing stock gets incorporated organically into those neighborhoods, then allowing for flexibility in uses so that you can have a live/work situation or offices or small commercial spaces integrated into residential neighborhoods. I think it will take incremental baby steps. I don’t think we’ll get to a point where we’ll see a corner store in a lollypop type neighborhood, but we can gently begin to integrate uses in a way that can improve the quality of life for people.”

Small towns, rural areas, and older streetcar suburbs all have the right bones to be 15-minute neighborhoods.



Courtesy of Michigan Municipal League

Coffee shops, small bistros and bodegas are important for locals to congregate, connect and participate in their community.

Sensible baby steps in increasing the allowed types of housing stock will diversify the demographic of people able to live in suburbs, with accessory dwelling units (ADUs) such as granny pods and in-law cottages allowing the elder birds to stay in the neighborhood once the younger ones have flown the nest. But how do these inhabitants enjoy “the essence of what constitutes the urban experience,” as described by Carlos Moreno of the Sorbonne University in Paris, a champion of the 15-minute concept? What desired destinations can be most easily integrated into the residential fabric of suburbia without affecting the feel of the neighborhood for all its residents? Coffee shops, small bistros and bodegas, perhaps an art gallery/studio or other such “third places” for locals to congregate, connect and participate in their community might be a good start.

“I would say in a suburban context, the planner target is an accessory commercial unit, with the idea of running a home-based business and having some sort of a little makeshift storefront out of your home and legalizing things like that and encouraging that to pop up,” says Herriges. “It’s a landscape that was designed for total separation of uses where all you’ve got is houses. It wasn’t built for walkable access to the things you want of daily life, so you would have to begin to unwind that and graft it on. It’s going to be a little ad hoc, it’s going to be an improvisational process — and it involves a certain tolerance for chaos. It’s not going to look like a quaint older neighborhood in Chicago or Brooklyn. It’s going to be a little messier, because of where we’re starting from.”



Intentional, incremental collaboration of local governments with civic organizations seems to be a theme among proponents of walkable, bikeable complete neighborhoods, without reinventing the wheel.

“Work with what you already have — small towns, rural areas, and older streetcar suburbs all have the right bones to be 15-minute neighborhoods,” says Loh. “There is no need to start over from scratch.” ●

Kurt Buss is a freelance writer who lives in Red Feather Lakes, Colo., with over 25 years of experience managing recycling programs along Colorado’s Front Range. He writes about resource conservation, being a baby boomer, and enjoying the Rocky Mountains. You can visit his website at [www.kurtbuscoloradofreelancewriter.com](http://www.kurtbuscoloradofreelancewriter.com)

## Making Smart Growth Happen

### NAR Placemaking Grants help plant seeds of success

“People make the community and this project brought the community together,” Candy Cole, executive director of the Foundation for the Orlando Regional REALTOR® Association (ORRA) observed as she discussed a community garden project made possible by an NAR Placemaking Grant.

The Parramore Community of west-central Orlando is a historically Black community that has long struggled economically and is located in a food desert. In 2009, the city tore down an apartment building and gave the lot to the community. Volunteers turned it into a community garden that’s an important source of free, locally grown produce available to anyone who shares a little sweat equity. After ORRA constructed six homes for veterans in the area, it became aware that the struggling community garden had become a costly burden to volunteers and needed major refurbishing.

“The garden has been a really special place. Residents can feed their families, but it also builds a sense of community,” Cole says. “We decided to go deep in this area and make a huge difference.”

ORRA leveraged a Placemaking Grant to build a greenhouse, trim trees, replace tools, repair and enhance irrigation and supply organic soil. Hydroponic towers were added and area college students are working with residents to increase harvests. Members also volunteered more than 500 hours in the garden. For one member, volunteering was a full-circle experience because he had fond memories of visiting his aunt who had lived in an apartment that had previously occupied the site.

“Our members are excited to have face-to-face conversations with people in the community. They loved that they could meet and know the people they’re helping,” Cole says.

Amber Burton Alfred, director of Governmental Affairs and Advocacy with the Houston Association of REALTORS® (HAR), agrees and adds that “community involvement can connect with local officials in a positive way.” HAR has approximately 40,000 members and leveraged a Placemaking Grant to develop an urban farm in cooperation with Plant It Forward, a nonprofit that operates several urban farms in the Houston area. Plant it Forward works

Photos courtesy of Orlando Regional REALTOR® Foundation



*Pictured is the community volunteer master gardener, Mr. Lynn Nicholson, with Orlando Regional REALTOR® Foundation President, Natalie Arrowsmith.*

Courtesy of HAR



2019 HAR Chairman Shannon Cobb Evans works on the Plant It Forward Westbury farm.

Courtesy of the Mainstreet Organization of REALTORS®



A community garden, The Legacy Garden Park in Willow Springs, Ill., helped forge lasting relationships.

with refugees to create sustainable urban farming businesses that help supply local markets with fresh produce.

“During the pandemic we all realized the need to pivot for social distancing and there was a food shortage and a need for sustainability. This was a timely project for 2020,” Burton Alfred says.

HAR not only helped establish Plant It Forward’s Westbury farm location, but helped secure city funding to beautify the area. Members also volunteered during a work day.

Willow Springs, Ill., is more than a thousand miles north of Houston, but the importance of creating connections is just as significant. Willow Springs is located about 18 miles southwest of Chicago and is one of 200 municipalities covered by the Mainstreet Organization of REALTORS®. A member noticed a centrally located empty lot had become an eyesore and worked with the city administrator and beautification committee to develop a community garden, and a Placemaking Grant made the community garden a reality.

The beautiful garden features accessible beds and a watering system. An adjacent bus stop was cleaned, flowers planted, electricity added and a little lending library built inside the shelter. The result is a lovely community garden located near the village’s main intersection.

Christina Andino, a member of the Jasinski Home Team at Baird and Warner, was instrumental in the garden’s development and says the garden isn’t only a beautiful space, but the experience has helped forge lasting relationships. As she explained in a video chronicling the garden’s development, “It was a great learning experience. I have ‘go to’ people now when I need advice or have questions. I know them personally and it’s nice to have these relationships.” To view the video in its entirety, go to <https://vimeo.com/449702991>

Nadine Scodro, the volunteer and advocacy specialist with the Mainstreet Organization of REALTORS® says the Willow Springs project perfectly illustrates how large organizations that cover a broad area can make a difference in many communities.

“Because of the grant funds, it’s more enticing for communities to work with us. It’s a huge incentive for communities to work with our REALTORS®,” Scodro says. “The funds help us spread the wealth and give back to the members.”

Placemaking Grant funds have provided seed money to not only help grow wholesome food and improve communities, but plant the seeds for fruitful relationships. ●

# 20-MINUTE NEIGHBORHOOD

# BINGO

The 20-minute neighborhood is all about living local. Can you access shopping, health facilities, services, and schools within a 20-minute walk or bike ride from your home?

Try this bingo card in your neighborhood or download it at <https://www.cpex.org/within20> to see which of the destinations you can find within 20 minutes of your home.

|                                  |                                 |   |                   |                    |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|-------------------|--------------------|
| BUS STOP                         | WHERE IS THE PARK?              | BIKE LANE                               | PHARMACY          | PLAYGROUND         |
| CHURCH                           | CROSSWALK                       | SCHOOL                                  | BAR               | GROCERY STORE      |
| THIS STREET COULD USE SOME TREES | COFFEE SHOP                     | 20-MINUTE NEIGHBORHOOD BINGO FREE SPACE | LIBRARY           | THE SIDEWALK STOPS |
| COMMUNITY CENTER                 | STREET LIGHTING                 | BIKE RACK                               | POST OFFICE       | RESTAURANT         |
| TRAIL                            | I CAN'T CROSS THE STREET SAFELY | DOCTOR'S OFFICE                         | VETERINARY OFFICE | DAY CARE           |



REALTORS® & Smart Growth

# on common ground

