

Associated Press

Wash. Leads Metro Areas in Walkability

By SARAH KARUSH – 1 day ago

ARLINGTON, Va. (AP) — Caitlin Jones and her fiancé, Evan Oxfeld, grew up in suburbs where getting anywhere worth going required a car. When the couple started looking for their first home together, they wanted something different: walkability.

"For me at least, that was the thing I missed most about college — just being able to walk everywhere," Oxfeld said as he and Jones strolled through Arlington's Ballston neighborhood, where they are moving into a condo.

Young professionals like Jones and Oxfeld, both 24, are driving a national trend toward more walkable communities, says the author of a report to be released Tuesday by the Brookings Institution. The report ranks the Washington region first among the country's major metropolitan areas in the number of "walkable places" per capita, thanks to changes in just the past 15 years.

Christopher B. Leinberger, a real estate developer and visiting fellow at Brookings, set out to quantify the walkability trend by counting the number of "regional-serving walkable urban places" in each of the 30 biggest metropolitan areas in the country. "Regional-serving" means the place is not just a bedroom community, but has jobs, retail or cultural institutions that bring in people who don't live there.

Leinberger, who also teaches urban planning at the University of Michigan, counted 157 such "walkable places" — including Boston's Beacon Hill, Miami's Coconut Grove and the Houston area's Sugar Land Town Square, one of many built-from-scratch "lifestyle centers" to make the list. The Tampa, Fla., area was the only one without a single place on his list.

Leinberger counted only places where significant subsidies are no longer required to spur development. He predicted that many more — such as downtown Detroit and Crossroads in Kansas City, Mo. — would reach that point within the next decade.

Walkable cities have been around for centuries, but Leinberger argues that after the rise of the automobile, planners and real estate developers hit on the lucrative suburban strip-mall formula and stuck to it.

"For 50 years we had this collective amnesia about how to build great places," said Leinberger, whose institution describes itself as a nonprofit public-policy organization.

The New York area had the highest number of walkable urban places in Leinberger's survey. Most of the 21 places he listed are neighborhoods in Manhattan.

But the Washington region, with 20 walkable places, outranked New York on a per-capita basis, and Leinberger says it could serve as a national model. It has one walkable place for every 264,000 people.

"Today there are 20 that are at or near critical mass, downtown just being one of them," Leinberger said. "Twenty years ago there were two."

The new additions include District of Columbia neighborhoods such as the West End area near George Washington University, and the revitalized Capitol Hill.

Across the Potomac River in Virginia, Arlington County has seven places on the list, including Ballston.

Leinberger attaches one major caveat to his report: The survey did not take into account the size of each walkable place. For example, midtown Manhattan is given the same weight as Reston Town Center, a lifestyle center outside Washington, even though the latter has only a tiny fraction of the office and retail space, residential units, and hotel rooms of midtown.

Leinberger attributes Washington's success with walkability to several factors, including a large population of 20- and 30-somethings and recent strong economic growth. But the chief factor, he said, is the success of the Metro. The 31-year-old rail system has transformed the region, shaping development and making the walkable urban model more viable.

Leinberger calls rail transit a key factor in the success of walkable places. Roughly two-thirds of the 157 places he counted are served by rail, he said.

Good planning also helped in the Washington region, particularly in Arlington, Leinberger said.

When the Metro was being built, county officials lobbied to put their portion underground along a central commercial road, rather than above ground and along the interstate. The county then loosened zoning regulations around each Metro stop, a policy that gave rise to "urban villages" such as Ballston.

Oxford, a software engineer, and Jones, an academic counselor at Georgetown University, said proximity to the Metro was a key factor in their decision to live in Ballston. They also like being able to walk to restaurants and shops and the main branch of the Arlington Public Library.

Walking among Ballston's tall buildings recently, Leinberger praised the mix of commercial and residential spaces, the picturesque courtyards, and the use of underground parking instead of surface lots.

The one big mistake is Ballston Commons Mall, a suburban-style mall that has failed to attract many national retailers, Leinberger said.

Even Ballston's boosters agree with that assessment.

"It seemed to be the right answer at the time. It does not work today," said Julie Mangis, executive director of the Ballston-Virginia Square Partnership. The group wants to encourage more retail across the entire neighborhood, she said, which compared with some other sections of Arlington is weighted heavily toward offices.

Leinberger predicted retail options would improve as the area's population continues to grow.

And if Ballston's sparkling new buildings seem a little too sparkling and new, well, that is bound to change, too, he said.

"This has some character, and it's only going to get better with time," Leinberger said. "Rome wasn't built in a day, and it certainly didn't get the patina of Rome in much less than a couple of centuries."

Kristine Bruce, of Arlington, Va., left, walks her son David Bruce, 2, through the Arlington neighborhood of Clarendon, Va., Monday, Dec. 3, 2007. A Brookings Institution report to be released Dec. 4, ranks Washington at the top of a list of walkable metropolitan areas. The report takes into account the suburbs as well as core cities. When told of the ranking Bruce said, "The ranking's not surprising to me, it's been this way for years but is only getting noticed now. It's nice to have stores nearby so that I don't have to go to the mall."