

Baltimore Sun

Baltimore so-so for walkability?



Just how walkable are Baltimore and its suburbs? A new [report](#) from the Brookings Institution in Washington rates the nation's top 30 metropolitan areas by the number of walkable places or neighborhoods they have. Good ol' Charm City comes in 15th, with just two places -- the Inner Harbor and Fells Point -- meeting the think tank's criteria for inclusion.

While we all might be able to think of places around Baltimore that are charming to walk - my own neighborhood of Catonsville springs to mind - the ranking only includes what it considers to be places of regional significance, as focuses of employment, shopping, entertainment or culture. It also was limited to places that were at or near what the report calls "critical mass," so thriving that they do not need public or private subsidies to attract new development.

"You're in the top 15," points out the report's author, Christopher B. Leinberger, a land-use thinker and teacher with a long history as a developer. A visiting scholar at Brookings, he lives in Washington and teaches real estate at the University of Michigan.

I did question Leinberger's failure to include downtown Annapolis as a regionally significant walkable place in the Baltimore area. He acknowledged it certainly would qualify, assuming it's officially counted in the Baltimore metro area, and may even move us up in the rankings.

So, what were the most walkable cities? Our neighbor, Washington, D.C. is tops. Though New York City has more walkable places, the DC area has the most walkable places per capita, according to Leinberger. Other highly walkable cities include Boston, San Francisco, Denver, Portland, Seattle, Chicago, Miami and Pittsburgh. Least walkable were Tampa-St. Petersburg, Fla., Cleveland, Cincinnati, Sacramento

Rail transit is often a key to walkability, according to Leinberger. Two-thirds of the 157 walkable places identified in the top 30 metro areas were served by rail. And geographically speaking, the most walkable cities tended to be in the Northeast (we're lumped in there) and on the West Coast.

Lastly, Leinberger points out that walkability is something that can be created or improved upon. He points out that Denver is one city that had no walkable centers 20 years ago, but now has five.

Baltimore has lots of potential to boost its walkability, Leinberger thinks. Towson, the Charles Street corridor and East Baltimore around Johns Hopkins all could develop in ways that make them great places to be afoot *sans auto*, he says. Columbia could be another one, depending on how plans for building up the town center shake out.

For another take on Baltimore's walkability, pick up a copy of *Charm City: A Walk Through Baltimore*, by noted local novelist Madison Smartt Bell. Here's a [story](#) about it from *The Sun*.

Walkability has economic importance, Leinberger contends, beyond its value for promoting urban and suburban quality of life. Without walkability, he argues, metro areas are going to lose their young people to areas with walkability, particularly those with good transit systems. And it's those Gen-Xers and young adults, he says, who are starting businesses and supporting culture and commerce.

"I'm fearful of 'A Tale of Two Metro Areas,'" Leingberger says, "those that keep their children and young adults and those that don't."

The hopeful news for Baltimore, he concludes, is that we've already got two (or maybe three) major walkable areas, a few other areas that could be made walkable, and at least the rudiments of a rail transit system.

"You've got the backbone," he says. "It's now a matter of political will."

Perhaps this will give ammo to transit advocates here in Baltimore, who are pushing for an east-west Red Line.