

Boston Globe

Most walkable city? Step in line, Hub Brookings Institution awards top honor to nation's capital

By Matt Viser, Globe Staff | December 5, 2007

With its tightknit residential neighborhoods, its boulevards lined with cafes, shops, and parks, Boston officials for years have smugly considered the Hub the best city for a stroll.

Hotel, tourist, and advertising executives two decades ago coined the phrase "America's Walking City" and made it part of an international ad campaign. Mayor Thomas M. Menino is fond of calling the city "the most walkable in America."

There has never been any empirical data for the boast.

"We just claimed title to it," said Pat Moscaritolo, president of the Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau. "Just let someone else dispute it."

Well, someone has.

A report by a venerable think tank, the Brookings Institution, declared yesterday that Boston is, in fact, not number one. Brookings instead bestowed top honors on the nation's capital, saying Washington D.C.'s urban planners have created "the national model of walkable urban growth."

Boston ranked second, ahead of San Francisco, Denver, and Portland, Ore.

The response from Boston officials was confusion, then indignation. (Some noted that Brookings is based in Washington. Coincidence?)

"Second? Who's first?" Moscaritolo said. "Washington doesn't strike me as a walkable city."

Menino - known to wear casual walking shoes with his suits - declined to comment.

The Brookings study, authored by Christopher B. Leinberger, a real estate developer and visiting fellow, used a formula that counted the number of walkable urban places per resident in 30 large metro regions. According to his study, the metro Washington area has 20 walkable places, or one for every 264,500 residents, compared with the Boston area, with 11 walkable places, or one for every 405,000 residents. Leinberger did not respond to a request for comment.

New York had the highest number of walkable places, with 21, but ranked 10th per capita.

The locations in the Boston area considered walkable included Beacon Hill, Back Bay, the North End, as well as Harvard, Kendall, and Davis squares in Cambridge and Somerville. Lowell, Wellesley, and Newburyport were also listed as walkable suburban areas.

"The older parts of Boston were designed in a time when people walked most places, and they're good for walkers," said Ann Hershfang, former president at Walk Boston, a nonprofit trying to

improve walking conditions in Massachusetts. "The struggle is trying to keep it that way with new development."

Boston began promoting itself as a walker's paradise in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as a way to combat the feeling that the city's twisted streets and Big Dig-related traffic jams made navigating by car a nightmare. The Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau said using sidewalks was a great way to take in the sights. It partnered with the Rockport shoe company and advertised Boston's pedestrian charms in European capitals.

The title of America's Walking City sunk in. Tour guides, college admissions offices, and sources as far flung as the Daily Telegraph of London all took to calling Boston the country's "most walkable city." It also became the home for Walking Magazine, which stopped publishing in 2001.

Baltimore (15th on the Brookings ranking) has since started using the term "Walk Baltimore." Seattle (sixth) has established a "Pedestrian Master Plan," with the goal of becoming "the most walkable city in the nation."

Moscaritolo said tourism officials have recently considered rebranding the city's identity, but said none work as well. Other titles they've considered but rejected include "City of Innovation" (good for business, but not good for tourism), and "City of Champions" (which would undoubtedly draw complaints from such places as Brockton, Pittsburgh, and Detroit, which have all laid claim to that title, and also could jinx the Red Sox).

In downtown Boston yesterday afternoon, the sidewalks were full of people walking in the manner of New Englanders in winter: head down, shoulders forward, arms pumping.

Most agreed Boston deserved high marks for traveling by foot.

"When it's not so cold, maybe," said Dimitrius Manakidis, 40. He lives in the Fenway, he said, and walks or takes the train nearly everywhere he goes.

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