

Cleveland Plain Dealer

Creative types

Will vote with their feet

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Walk Score, a new Web site popular with urbanists, rates neighborhoods by their walkability - basically the ease of meeting daily needs on foot. The higher the score, the more walkable a place is.

The rise of Walk Score is another indicator that the layout of the American Dream has been fundamentally changing over the past 10 to 15 years. Downtown Cleveland (the Flats, Warehouse District, Central Business District and Playhouse Square) is on the way toward this new version of the American Dream, but it's not there yet. Only University Circle could be considered at "critical mass" in the region.

Factor in gas prices

The "Ozzie and Harriett" drivable suburban vision of the American Dream is being supplemented with the "Seinfeld" vision of "walkable urbanism." Led by late-marrying and single young adults and empty-nester baby boomers, many households are looking for the excitement and increased options that living and working in a walkable urban place can bring. Current demographic trends promise continued demand. And \$4 gas prices are just accelerating the trend.

A recent Brookings Institution survey of the largest 30 metropolitan areas in the country identifies the 157 walkable urban places that play a regionally significant role (those with concentrations of employment, schools, professional sports, entertainment, hospitals, retail, etc.). It ranked these metros on their per capita number of walkable urban places. Washington, D.C., was first, followed by Boston, San Francisco, Denver and Portland.

The top 15 metro areas had the vast majority, 85 percent, of these walkable urban places. This showed that the top 30 metros are dividing between "haves" and "have nots" - areas that have many walkable urban options and those that are lagging. Additionally, two-thirds of these 157 places had rail transit, demonstrating the importance of rail transit to the emergence of walkable urbanism.

A surprising finding of the survey is that while downtowns and downtown-adjacent places are a major location of walkable urbanism, 50 percent of the walkable urban places were in the suburbs.

A major benefit of walkable urban development is that it keeps and attracts young adults to the metro area, many of whom willingly trade crushing car commutes for walkable places to live and work. Walkable urban places seem to attract the well educated, the so-called "creative class." Even the nascent revival in downtown Detroit has seen 83 percent of new residents arriving with a college education, compared with 26 percent of the national population. Walkable urbanism increases choice in how to live and is proven to be key to the economic development future of a metro area.

Cleveland's rank

Metro Cleveland ranked a poor 29th in the survey since only University Circle made the cut. This is in spite of a pioneering rail transit system from the 1920s and the newer light-rail system.

If metro Cleveland follows other leading metropolitan areas in this market trend, there should be 12 to 14 regionally significant walkable urban places over the next 20 years, downtown Cleveland and University Circle being just two of them.

The economic development future of the Cleveland metro area is linked to its ability to expand its current offerings of walkable urban places. If the area does not offer a way of life that the market is demanding, that demand will be satisfied in the other metro areas that do. Building those additional walkable urban places and bringing downtown to critical mass will increase the economic development Cleveland metro needs so badly - and it will increase walk scores as well.

Leinberger, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, is a professor at the University of Michigan and a real estate developer. He is speaking today at 11:30 a.m. at the Historic Downtown Cleveland Luncheon Forum at Windows On The River. A few tickets are still available; call 216-344-3937.