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Metro Atlanta ranks 14th among 30 walkable cities

By [BRIAN FEAGANS](#)

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By one new measure of walkability, metro Atlanta is middle of the road. Or, depending on where you are, middle of the sidewalk.

The region ranked 14th among the 30 largest American metropolitan areas in a survey of walkable urban places released Tuesday by the Brookings Institution. The think tank based in Washington, D.C. put its home city at the top of the list, followed by Boston, San Francisco, Denver and Portland. At the bottom were Phoenix, Sacramento, Cincinnati, Cleveland and, lastly, Tampa.

The report didn't merely measure how comfortable an area is for those traveling by sneaker, heel or boot. It tallied up only "regional-serving" walkable places in each metro city. These spots provide not only housing but also something of regional importance such as employment, retail, entertainment or cultural fare. Of the 157 such places found by Brookings, the Atlanta region had four: Atlantic Station, Buckhead, Decatur and Midtown.

Atlanta and Miami were the only metros in the top 15 whose downtowns didn't make the cut. But Christopher Leinberger, the Brookings visiting fellow who authored the report, said there was much debate over whether to include Atlanta's redeveloping city center. "We decided it wasn't quite at critical mass," said Leinberger, a University of Michigan professor and author of "The Option of Urbanism: Investing in A New American Dream," upon which the survey is based. "But it's damn close. Atlanta should be really proud of what's been done over the past decade."

The survey underscored the link between walkable areas and rail transit, finding that 65 percent of the pedestrian meccas were situated along the tracks. It concluded that metro areas not experiencing this type of development might want to consider investments in rail.

And Leinberger noted that Atlanta could do more with special zoning districts around MARTA stops to encourage development. "You have a tremendous resource in Atlanta with MARTA," he said. "But you haven't taken enough advantage of development within walking distance of those stations."

HOT SPOTS

Atlantic Station. Shop and walk to a movie. Shop and walk to a restaurant. Shop and walk to more shops. But what sets this redevelopment behemoth apart isn't just sheer size. Thousands of residents can shop and walk home. Joins Midtown on the list as "downtown adjacent" areas.

Buckhead. Made the list in the "suburban redevelopment" category, defined as failed drivable commercial areas that have been redeveloped in walkable urbanism. Also known for its dance spots and eateries. Increasingly cruisable — on foot — for those living and working in the high rises filling the skyline.

Decatur. Here, parents sip lattes while kids dance in the misty fountain at the center of the town square. Traffic jams do happen — in strollers. And shoppers sauntering down the lantern-lined sidewalks aren't just on a first-name basis with each other. Jake means ice cream. Eddie means music. And Twain means billiards and beer.

Midtown. Here, biscuits fly, roller-bladers glide and walkers rejoice in the greenery of Piedmont Park. Boutiques and eateries are just a short stroll from regional draws like the Atlanta Botanical Garden and the High Museum. Unlike much of downtown, foot traffic doesn't wane after work.

THE LIST

The Brookings Institution ranked metro areas by how many walkable regional draws they have. Atlanta was in the middle of the pack.

1. Washington
2. Boston
3. San Francisco
4. Denver
5. Portland
6. Seattle
7. Chicago
8. Miami
9. Pittsburgh
10. New York
11. San Diego

12. Los Angeles
13. Philadelphia
14. Atlanta
15. Baltimore
16. St. Louis
17. Minneapolis
18. Detroit
19. Columbus
20. Las Vegas
21. Houston
22. San Antonio
23. Kansas City
24. Orlando
25. Dallas
26. Phoenix
27. Sacramento
28. Cincinnati
29. Cleveland
30. Tampa