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Life around Tampa Bay is no walk in the park -- or to it

A survey of the nation's "walkable urban places" ranks the Tampa Bay area as poorest.

By JANET ZINK, Times Staff Writer
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Cars have the run of downtown Tampa, but pedestrians are not so lucky. "We have allowed cars to dominate our urban form," said Tampa City Council member Linda Saul-Sena.
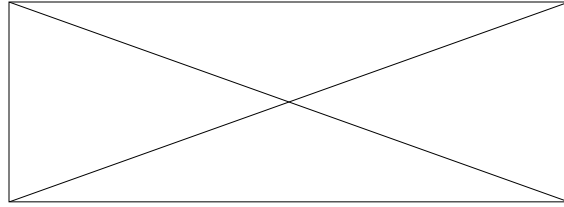
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How do you rate your neighborhood?

Breaking News Video

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TAMPA -- Picture a place where you can step out of your home and walk to work, to a coffee shop, an art gallery, the gym.

That picture will not include anywhere in Tampa Bay, according to a new study that ranks the area dead last for walkability in a survey of 30 major metropolitan areas.

"I am so sorry," said Christopher Leinberger, a developer and visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, a public policy think tank. "I am not trying to be harsh on anybody. You all are moving in the right direction. Your downtowns just haven't reached critical mass. But they will."

The survey looked at which cities have the largest number of "walkable urban places" per capita, defined as compact areas in cities and suburbs that put residents within walking distance of work, entertainment venues, schools and shopping. Every city on the list has at least one success story.

Top-ranked Washington, D.C., has Georgetown. Boston, No. 2 on the list, has Harvard Square. The Miami area, in eighth place, has Coral Gables.

The Tampa area has nothing, according to Leinberger.

"The issue is, can you basically walk to local services? Can you walk to a great restaurant, can you walk to work?" said Leinberger, who also directs the graduate real estate program at the University of Michigan.

Most people aren't willing to trek more than five or 10 blocks to reach a destination, he said, so they hop in a car.

The news is no surprise to some city leaders.

"Overall, he's correct. We have allowed cars to dominate our urban form," said Tampa City Council member Linda Saul-Sena, a longtime champion of transforming the city into a place where people wear out their shoes before their tires.

"It's painful," she said. "To be recognized in a national survey as a terrible place for pedestrians is really discouraging."

As steps in the right direction, she cites spending money on sidewalks, plans for bus rapid transit and the development of mixed-use neighborhoods like the Channel District near downtown.

And she says Davis Islands, where she lives, is one of the city's most walkable neighborhoods, with restaurants and a few shops reachable on foot.

But the neighborhood lacks a convenient grocery store and has just a handful of offices.

The South Howard Avenue neighborhood has streets lined with restaurants, grocery stores and shops, but sidewalks end abruptly.

"We have a lot of work to do," Saul-Sena said.

St. Petersburg City Council member Jeff Danner defended his downtown.

"It's packed with people. It's easier to walk than drive. The cars are at gridlock, and people are moving freely," he said. "There's considerably more residential property downtown than there was 10 years ago, and of course a lot more than downtown Tampa, and integrated right in. You can take an elevator down to the retail."

Leinberger's study notes that most cities with lots of walkable neighborhoods have a rail system in place, and he commended the Tampa Bay area for looking at such a system.

"The question is, have you paid for it?" he said.

Ron Rotella, executive director of the Westshore Alliance, said the large business district is working to improve walkability and increase funding for public transportation. He wants the city to approve using transportation impact fees collected there to help pay for public transit.

As it is now, he said, the business district is nearly impossible to navigate on foot. He said he sees people waiting and watching cars go by as they try to cross West Shore Boulevard.

"They finally get frustrated and just step out into the traffic and cross the street," he said.

It's not the first time Tampa has been rapped for its mean streets. A 2004 survey determined pedestrians in the Tampa Bay area take their lives in their hands more than in any other metro area in the country except Orlando.