



The Washington, DC region is great >> and it can be greater.

“Walkable urban” places enjoy economic success, but face social equity challenges

DEVELOPMENT By [Dan Reed](#) (Editorial Board) September 10, 2012 29

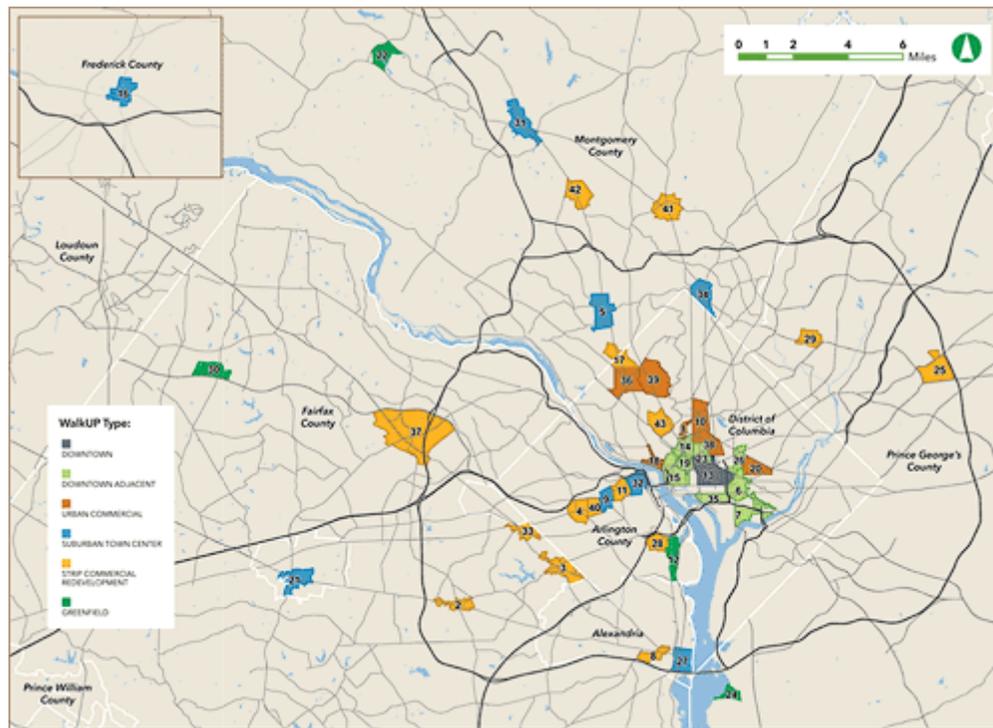
After decades of disinvestment and suburban flight, the Washington region’s urban neighborhoods are now driving the local economy, says a study from George Washington University professor Christopher Leinberger. However, ensuring that everyone can participate in these communities will be a top challenge for the future.



Downtown Bethesda. Photo by [eddie.welker](#) on [Flickr](#).

The report, titled [DC: The WalkUP Wake-Up Call](#), builds [on Leinberger’s previous research](#) drawing a connection between “walkable urban places” and economic success. It vindicates smart growth policies which have made so-called WalkUPs the preferred choice for many residents, shoppers and businesses. “What was perceived as a niche market is becoming the market,” Leinberger says.

Leinberger identifies include 43 WalkUPs in the region, specifically “regionally significant” places with a lot of jobs, that either already have urban characteristics or the “intention” to create them in the future. These places are distinct from “drivable suburban” places, which as their name suggests are built around the car. Leinberger then ranks each of the WalkUPs using indicators of economic activity and social equity.



*Leinberger’s 43 “walkable urban places,” or “WalkUPs,” in Greater Washington.
Image from the report.*

However, the study doesn’t automatically equate “urban” with “center city,” as most of the WalkUPs are outside of the District. The WalkUPs fall into 6 categories, ranging from “downtown” and “urban commercial” neighborhoods in the District to “suburban town centers” and “greenfield” communities outside of the city.

“Suburban” WalkUPs include historic towns, like Alexandria and Frederick, that later became suburbs, and newer communities like Tysons Corner that are being retrofitted with more urban features.

Jonathan O’Connell recently questioned whether you can “export” city life to the suburbs, with some calling the new “town centers” “plastic” or “artificial.” But as Leinberger points out, there’s a growing consensus that the recession and demographic shifts will change the way we arrange our lives and our communities. As a result, the demand for urban living has surfaced outside of center city neighborhoods. If done well, and with the proper support, suburban town centers can become cherished, authentic places and integral parts of Greater Washington’s urban ecosystem.

		Economic Rank			
		Copper	Silver	Gold	Platinum
Social Rank	Plat.	Silver Spring Wheaton	Courthouse Rosslyn		
	Gold	Bailey's Crossroads Crystal City Prince George's Plaza Rockville Seven Corners White Flint	Adams Morgan Ballston Bethesda Columbia Heights	Dupont Circle Logan Circle Virginia Square	Foggy Bottom/W. End
	Silver	New Carrollton Tysons Corner Van Ness	Clarendon Reston Town Center U Street/Shaw Woodley Park	Capitol Hill Friendship Heights	Downtown DC
	Copper	Frederick H Street NE/Atlas Historic Fairfax City Kentlands	Carlyle Old Town Alexandria	Tenleytown	Georgetown
	NR	Annandale	National Harbor Pentagon City	Capitol Riverfront NoMA	Golden Triangle

WalkUPs by economic and social rank. 5 WalkUPs were not rated (NR) on the social equity scale due to insufficient or unreliable data. Table by David Alpert.

To determine a WalkUP’s success, Leinberger uses economic and social indicators to rank each one as “Copper,” “Silver,” “Gold,” or “Platinum.” The study notes a strong correlation between a community’s economic performance and its Walk Score, job density and education levels.

Though they take up less than 1% of the land in Greater Washington, WalkUPs already have a third of the region’s jobs. They contain nearly half of the region’s “income properties,” or offices, apartments, hotels and retail space, up from just a quarter in 1992. Office rents and home values in WalkUPs are each over 70% higher than elsewhere in the region. Not surprisingly, WalkUPs tend to contribute more in tax revenues than the amount of land they consume.

Meanwhile, Leinberger measured social equity performance based on housing and transportation costs, unemployment levels, racial diversity, and transit accessibility. Over three-quarters of the WalkUPs are close to Metro stations, reducing transportation costs, but housing is often far more expensive.

The study found that many economically successful WalkUPs, like Georgetown, often failed to create or sustain a diverse population. Almost

all of the WalkUPs are located within Greater Washington’s affluent “[favored quarter](#),” generally to the northwest of the city. They’re far from much of the region’s working class, many of whom lack cars and must endure long transit rides to job centers.

WalkUPs are now appearing outside of the “[favored quarter](#),” bringing jobs and other amenities closer to low-income households. While some are successful, others like [University Town Center](#) and [Wheaton](#) have struggled to develop. Leinberger highlights Silver Spring for seeking economic and social parity. It “walks the tightrope in attempting to achieve higher economic returns without gentrifying and detracting from its unique and diverse character,” he notes.



Downtown Silver Spring has managed to stay diverse despite substantial new development. Photo by the author.

To ensure the future economic success and social cohesion of the WalkUPs, Leinberger calls for public policies that direct more development to them through zoning and investment in infrastructure, like more pedestrian-friendly streets. In addition, he says more must be done to provide affordable and workforce housing in WalkUPs, both through subsidies and simply building more housing to meet the demand. He also stresses the importance of [building neighborhood support](#) for walkable urban development, which happened in White Flint.

While The WalkUp Wake-Up Call is encouraging to anyone who cares about creating great urban neighborhoods, many of the trends Leinberger highlights have taken hold only in the past few years. Some of the places in the study may be years or decades from becoming truly walkable or urban; meanwhile, a large portion of the region’s development still takes places on the suburban fringe, where it’s less sustainable. On top of that, the benefits of pedestrian-friendly, transit-oriented development have yet to reach the people who need it the most.

The real “wake-up call” isn’t about how far we’ve come, but how far we still have to go.

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Tagged: [christopher leinberger](#), [development](#), [favored quarter](#), [pedestrians](#), [smart growth](#), [walkability](#)



Dan Reed is an urban planner and freelance writer. Check out his regular column in [Washingtonian](#) and his blog, [Just Up the Pike](#). He's also an agent at [Living In Style Real Estate](#). Dan still gets a full night's sleep. He lives in downtown Silver Spring. All opinions are his own.

29 COMMENTS

THREADED NEWEST AT BOTTOM NEWEST AT TOP

[almondwine](#) on September 10, 2012 at 12:53 pm

Anyone have any insight as to the exclusion of certain South Arlington areas (Pike/Walter Reed, Penrose, Shirlington)?

REPLY LINK REPORT

[dan reed!](#) on September 10, 2012 at 12:57 pm

The study focused on places “where the metropolitan area” works; i.e., job centers or regional destinations, though Leinberger says there will be a follow-up

study looking at “local-serving” walkable urban places like Shirlington.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Gray on September 10, 2012 at 1:11 pm

He seems to be basing the economic rankings entirely on rent figures, but Virginia Square is somehow ranked above Rosslyn, Courthouse, Clarendon, and Ballston? That seems a bit suspect.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Rosslyn-Ballston Corridor on September 10, 2012 at 1:18 pm

“In addition, he says more must be done to provide affordable and workforce housing in WalkUPs, both through subsidies and simply building more housing to meet the demand”

Why? What is the argument for spending a lot of money doing this (and driving up the prices even more by taking away scarce housing resources), instead of having these less affluent people live near other metro stations in less desirable areas?

A high price tells you something; it tells you there is more demand than supply. Only by lowering the economic attractiveness of an area (and undoing its success), can you truly make it economically diverse again.

On a personal note; more affordable housing would make me reconsider my current place of residence, and with me many other Yup's who form the economic backbone of these areas.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

jag on September 10, 2012 at 1:27 pm

Wow, Rosslyn-Ballston Corridor. Way to own it, at least.

On a personal note, people like that is the reason why I (and plenty of “Yups”) will never be caught dead near R-B.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

dan reed! on September 10, 2012 at 1:28 pm

Affordable housing is only undesirable if you think the people who'd live in it are undesirable. I don't think the Rosslyn-Ballston Corridor would be a worse

place if yuppies pulling six-figure salaries were rubbing elbows with school-teachers or firemen or secretaries, but then again, I don't live in Arlington.

There IS a limit to how much we can subsidize otherwise expensive housing to make it affordable, to which the answer (as Leinberger points out) is to increase the supply - whether in already “hot” areas like Arlington, or by creating more “walkable urban places” elsewhere in the region to spread out the demand.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[AWalkerInTheCity](#) on September 10, 2012 at 1:29 pm

RBC well first of all some of the solutions would shift the supply curve, and would not increase prices for top units.

Second, since one of the social benefits of WUPs is that they decrease vehicle usage, and since low and moderate income people are more likely to be carfree, increasing affordable and workforce housing near them can be good for enviro goals.

Third, we as a society may want more economically diverse areas. Certainly the image of WUPs as yuppie havens does not make it easier to overcome NIMBY-ISM. Also, since RBC began its upward swing when it had more affordable units, I doubt there will not be enough yups willing to live near them.

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[charlie](#) on September 10, 2012 at 2:04 pm

@danreed. Clearly, you don't live in Arlington. Our firefighters and policemen are making six figures—hell, I know a few who live in Georgetown.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Jasper](#) on September 10, 2012 at 4:44 pm

@ dan reed (& others):*There IS a limit to how much we can subsidize otherwise expensive housing*

Subsidizing... It's not really subsidizing. It's limiting profit by a private company by forcing them to do something responsible.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[dan reed!](#) on September 10, 2012 at 4:54 pm

Only so much of the cost of a new home is profit. A lot of it comes from land (normally higher in an urban setting), materials (duh), labor, “soft costs” (architects/lawyers/marketing/sales staff, etc.) and so on. A developer in MoCo says the permitting process alone adds \$50k to the cost of a new home.

Besides, a subsidy isn't limiting profit. It's helping to cover the cost of a project that may not otherwise pencil out (i.e., may result in no profit or even result in a loss.) Not that I think it's wrong, but it can't be are only solution for providing affordable housing.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

oBoe on September 10, 2012 at 5:09 pm

I don't think the Rosslyn-Ballston Corridor would be a worse place if yuppies pulling six-figure salaries were rubbing elbows with schoolteachers or firemen or secretaries, but then again, I don't live in Arlington.

The problem here is that for a very long time, “affordable housing” has been synonymous with “welfare housing for the poorest of the poor”. (Probably because the history of government subsidized housing projects in the US is one where initially middle-class residents took residence, but were replaced over time with absolute social dysfunction).

Sorry, but that's our history. And we're first going to need to change that public perception.

Because there are a lot of folks who hear the phrase “affordable housing” and understand it in that historical context. No one opposes affordable housing because they don't want to live next door to a schoolteacher or fireman. They oppose it because they don't want to live next door to a building full of jobless, addicted single mothers with out-of-control children.

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Drumz on September 10, 2012 at 5:58 pm

This R-B resident is hoping that we can add a lot more supply to the area. Plus the money spent increasing supply is the developers rather than the county's

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MattF on September 10, 2012 at 7:16 pm

It's good to see an analytical approach to 'rating' these areas, but I've got some doubts about the results. Do you think Reston Town Center really clusters with U Street/Shaw, or Bethesda with Adams Morgan? And Tyson's Corner is an

outlier—I have a suspicion that it accounts for a significant proportion of the commercial activity in the whole category.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

DaveS on September 10, 2012 at 7:39 pm

Very interesting article. Living near White Flint and Rockville, I would like to point out that while most development is around those two Metro stations, there are a sprinkling of mixed use (mostly low rise residential with ground level retail) popping up in between. This is developing as a single continuous walk up corridor.

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AWalkerInTheCity on September 10, 2012 at 8:03 pm

in what sense is annandale a walkable urban place?

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Ms. D on September 10, 2012 at 8:47 pm

RE: re-framing affordable housing, it pays to point out that much of the affordable housing in the region is available for families making up to 80% of the AMI. For a family of 4, that's over \$85K/year, or, in other words, 2 working adults making over \$20/hour full-time. Even for the lower-income housing, much of it is open to people making up to 60% of the AMI, or almost \$65K/year for the same family. Personally, I would have no problem living next to a family making \$65-86K/year...sound like good, responsible people to me. Of course, many of those families can't afford reasonably-sized homes (for a family) in the most walkable areas, despite decent incomes that indicate professional, para-professional, or high-level manual or service jobs. And I'm not even one of those people who seem to think you need 1,000 square feet and 1.5 baths per household member. Even in my neighborhood, which tends to be a bit more affordable, an upscale 3-bedroom (recently renovated or built, 1200-1500 square feet, usually 2 baths) will run around or over \$3K per month, or at least 41% of the income of someone making 80% of the AMI with a family of 4.

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Falls Church on September 10, 2012 at 9:10 pm

it pays to point out that much of the affordable housing in the region is available for families making up to 80% of the AMI. For a family of 4, that's over \$85K/year

That's the catch-22. When affordable housing caters to folks making that kind of money, it raises flags, such as:

“We’re putting a half-a-billion dollars into subsidized housing for people making \$70,000 to \$120,000 a year instead of handling a lot of our most important priorities, such as transportation in Tysons Corner,” said Herrity. He has been especially critical of workforce housing subsidies for families that earn as much as 120 percent of the area median income, which is set by the federal government and is now \$107,500 for a family of four.

But, when affordable housing caters to the truly poor, it gets opposition from NIMBYs.

I think the best use of affordable housing (or it's better named version—inclusionary zoning) is to entice residents to allow gentrification. That's what we're seeing in the Columbia Pike corridor where long-time residents are (sort of) allowing gentrification in return for requiring builders to include some affordable units.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Ms. D on September 10, 2012 at 11:20 pm

[Deleted for violating the [comment policy](#).] ...even for a family making 80% of the AMI, or almost \$86K/year, the rent or mortgage for a 3-bedroom home in my, more-affordable-than-most-transit-accessible community is still over 40% of their income. The “subsidies” provided are often non-monetary (density bonuses) or one-off (a fixed amount per unit). Those non-monetary or one-off subsidies allow moderate-income families to continue to live in the community. Though I do like any program that KEEPS people in their homes (within reason...we shouldn't subsidize staying in a home to the point that someone who would have “cashed out” would choose to stay, just enough to allow people who WANT to stay to stay), it's important to make our communities more inclusive and provide opportunity to middle-class people who would LIKE to lower their transportation costs and environmental impacts, but otherwise couldn't afford to, to do so.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Ms. D on September 10, 2012 at 11:26 pm

Actually, I amend that. They could buy a home for less than 40% of their income...assuming they have the down payment and credit to do so, and are fixed enough to want to buy a home. It's the rents that exceed 40%.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Jasper on September 11, 2012 at 7:19 am

@ dan reed: *Besides, a subsidy isn't limiting profit.*

Maybe I am not understanding how affordable housing works. I thought the government forced apartment owners to rent some small units for a low price. That is not a subsidy. That is limiting the profit of the apartment owner.

It is only a subsidy is the government actually cuts a check to someone involved.

@ oboe: *They oppose it because they don't want to live next door to a building full of jobless, addicted single mothers with out-of-control children.*

Oddly, many yuppies use the same coke dealer as that alleged addicted single mom. And while they have no problem helping our their yuppie friends with their kids, they would not lift a finger for the kids of the single mom.

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AWalkerInTheCity on September 11, 2012 at 9:32 am

Jasper - I dont know about Moco but it works differently in NoVa than in DC.

In DC under inclusionary zoning all new developments (oever a certain size?) must have a certain pct of affordable units. In NoVa, developers who offer affordable units can get a density bonus above what is otherwise allowed - they are receiving a subsidy in the form of additional density.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

AWalkerInTheCity on September 11, 2012 at 9:36 am

“I think the best use of affordable housing (or it's better named version—inclusionary zoning) is to entice residents to allow gentrification. That's what we're seeing in the Columbia Pike corridor where long-time residents are (sort of) allowing gentrification in return for requiring builders to include some affordable units.”

1. I share that POV mostly - but I recognize that POV means either acknowledging some justice in the position of the long time residents, or at least a pragmatic acceptance of the political reality. Some hardline libertarians will not accept either.

2. terminology - not all affordable housing is inclusionary zoning. Sometimes affordable housing can involve a cash subsidy (possibly funded by proffers on new development, but not necessarily), or even construction by govt. And the

way I've seen it used, IZ refers to a general mandate to include affordable units in new development, not to a voluntary proffer in exchange for a density bonus.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[NikolasM](#) on September 11, 2012 at 11:01 am

Every time I drive through Annandale I see the potential for a large urban redo. The streets already have a decent grid to build off of, but it is nothing but a giant sea of parking lots and aging strip malls. The area could become a huge focal point with the right investments.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Juanita de Talmas](#) on September 11, 2012 at 12:00 pm

Virginia Square is the least interesting (retail, density, things to do) stop between Rosslyn and Ballston. How does it rank higher than the rest? Something is amiss in their ranking criteria.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[drumz](#) on September 11, 2012 at 12:13 pm

I think those "boring" features at least bring it a measure of some affordability which boosts its social rank while it's pretty much the same business level as the other VA. stops (except rosslyn) but with DARPA, The FDIC, and GMU right there that's a lot of jobs.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Juanita de Talmas](#) on September 11, 2012 at 12:43 pm

Jobs, maybe...but hardly any retail.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Jay Roberts](#) on September 11, 2012 at 7:20 pm

Falls Church and Anacostia were listed in The Option of Urbanism as emerging, but are not on of the 43.

Any thoughts?

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Ms. D](#) on September 12, 2012 at 11:50 pm

After doing a little research and talking with friends who have bought in my neighborhood recently, it appears that the mortgage and other housing expenses (utilities, maintenance, taxes, and other expenses) for new *owners* are around 35% of gross income for a family making 80% of the AMI. Better, but still a bit on the high side. Sure, that can be offset by lower transportation costs, but it goes to show that transit-accessibility is not affordable to many middle-class families (if you're at 80% AMI, you're certainly middle-class...it shouldn't be so hard to live in an emerging transit-accessible community).

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

LuvDusty on September 14, 2012 at 12:18 pm

That chart is suspect. Clarendon ranks **BELOW** Columbia Heights in terms of Economic and Social rank? Seriously? I spend most of my free time in both those areas, and that's got to be totally wrong.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)



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