

Charlotte Observer

Sat, Mar. 08, 2008

Charlotte, walk this way

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Walk Score, a new Web site popular with urbanists (www.walkscore.com), 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 of how the American Dream has been changing fundamentally over the past 10 to 15 years. Charlotte in general and Center City Charlotte in particular are well on their way toward this new version of the American Dream, but much more needs to be done.

The Ozzie and Harriet drivable suburban vision of the American Dream is being supplemented by the Seinfeld vision of "walkable urbanism." Led by late-marrying and single young adults and empty-nester boomers, many households are looking for the excitement and increased options living and working in a walkable urban place can bring. Current demographic trends promise continued demand.

'Haves' and 'have nots'

A recent Brookings Institution survey (www.brookings.edu/walkableurbanism) of the largest 30 metro areas in the country identifies 157 walkable urban places that play a regionally significant role, with concentrations of employment, education, professional sports, entertainment, housing, etc. It ranked these metro areas 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 metro areas are dividing between "haves" and "have nots," or those that have many walkable urban options and those that are lagging.

Additionally, two-thirds of the 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 many major walkable living areas are downtowns and downtown-adjacent places, 50 percent of the walkable urban places are in suburbs.

'Creative class' attracted

A major benefit of walkable urban development is that it keeps and attracts young adults, 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 in the nascent revival in downtown Detroit, 83 percent of new residents have a college education, compared to 26 percent of the national population. Walkable urbanism increases choice in how to live and is proven to be key to the economic development of a metro area.

Metro Charlotte was not ranked in the Brookings survey, since you are not yet in the top 30 metro areas in the country (you are in the top 35). However, Charlotte has done three things that will insure the emergence of many walkable urban places.

The first is major investment in light rail by Charlotte Area Transit Systems (CATS), starting with the new Lynx line, and planning for a metro-wide system.

The second is planning around the proposed stations to encourage high-density, walkable urban development.

The third is private sector-led management of these walkable urban areas, the best example being Charlotte Center City Partners, which provides the direction and services needed for these complex places to thrive.

Continue Charlotte's miracle

If Charlotte follows other leading metropolitan areas, there will be six to 10 regionally significant walkable urban places developed in the Charlotte area over the next 20 years, Center City being just one of them. The economic-development future of the Charlotte metro area is linked to your ability to expand your current offerings of walkable urban places. Building those additional places will continue the economic-development miracle that has been Charlotte for so many years and it will increase your Walk Scores as well.

Want to hear more?

Christopher Leinberger will speak at the Civic by Design Forum on Tuesday, March 11, at 5:30 p.m. at Levine Museum of the New South. Contact Brenda Campbell for more information at brenda@dpz.com.