

Dallas Morning News

Sidewalks won't get you too far in Dallas

Report finds few spots in North Texas made for walking

12:00 AM CST on Tuesday, December 11, 2007

By THEODORE KIM / The Dallas Morning News
tkim@dallasnews.com

Most evenings, as the Dallas skyline begins to twinkle, dog walkers, errand runners and the dining set congregate along McKinney Avenue in Uptown.



SONYA N. HEBERT/DMN

With restaurants, businesses and living options all close by, Uptown makes it easy for people, including Burney Washington (right) and Jacob Fakheri, to walk to their destinations.

Many put shoes to sidewalks, and together, they emit a vibe that hints at quintessential, pedestrian-friendly city life.

But around Dallas, scenes like this are few and far between, according to a first-of-its-kind Brookings Institution examination of the nation's 30 largest cities.



LOUIS DeLUCA/DMN

Uptown Dallas is one of the few areas in North Texas that scored high in the walkability study. The national study was looking for areas that offer a mix of residential, retail and entertainment options as well as easy access to public transportation.

The Dallas area is among the bottom dwellers in a survey identifying urban communities where driving takes a back seat to walking.

At 25th, Big D placed lower than traffic-choked Atlanta, Detroit and Los Angeles, and below Houston and San Antonio, the other Texas cities on the list. Washington, D.C., ranked first.

Here and elsewhere, empty nesters, young professionals and immigrants seeking a taste of city life have driven demand for urban-style development. That has coincided with a civic push to rejuvenate sprawling subdivisions and malls with a more compact blend of housing and retail.

But for all that talk, the survey suggests that most of the Dallas-Fort Worth region remains a model of car-dominated suburban subsistence. Experts say the Texan way of wide-open spaces, big cars and highways is an intoxicating combination that leads to suburban sprawl.

"The traditional thinking is that you couldn't pry the hands of drivers off of their SUVs until they were dead," said land-use planner Christopher B. Leinberger, the study's author and a visiting fellow at Brookings, an independent public policy group based in Washington, D.C.

Yet, Mr. Leinberger and others say Dallasites are not as hopelessly tethered to their cars and parking-lot lifestyles as the report implies.

Mr. Leinberger said the survey comes with caveats, which means some of the findings – Pittsburgh is ranked ninth, one spot ahead of New York, for example – might seem quirky.

In addition, with development flocking to downtown Dallas and Fort Worth, DART expanding its light-rail lines and urban-style projects launching in the suburbs, experts say the area is catching up.

"Obviously, the more walkable communities you have, the less congestion and less pollution there is," said Wendel Withrow, chairman of the Dallas Sierra Club. "At stake is the livability of our cities."

Sleep up, shop down

The Brookings survey attempts to identify the common ingredients that make a community walkable: a fusion of retail, residences and restaurants; access to buses, rail lines or bike paths; parks and places to congregate. Just as important, all of it should be within walking distance.

"I think of it as, 'You sleep upstairs and shop downstairs,'" said Ed McMahon, a senior fellow at the Urban Land Institute in Washington, D.C.

But the survey, released last week, bears out what many who sit in traffic daily already know: The Dallas area as a whole is far from a model of efficient urban planning.

Mr. Leinberger determined a region's walkability by counting up the number of distinct places that, because of building patterns, transit options and other factors, encourage people to routinely leave their cars at home in favor of walking.

He then divided the region's population by its number of walkable places. In the Dallas area, the survey identified Uptown and two suburban developments, Legacy Town Center in Plano and Addison Circle, as walkable.

Other well-known urban developments here, such as Dallas' Mockingbird Station, the West End area and Sundance Square in Fort Worth, weren't deemed walkable.

That's because those areas are not yet self-sustaining and need significant additional subsidies to grow, Mr. Leinberger said.

Johnny Campbell, president and chief executive officer of Sundance Square, took issue with that finding.

"Fort Worth's entire downtown central business district is a walkable core," he said.
"What other economic evidence does somebody need?"

Mr. Leinberger admitted the survey is not without its limitations: Because the size of a particular walkable community isn't taken into account, in the survey Legacy Town Center counts the same as Midtown Manhattan.

But the report is unique, Mr. Leinberger said, because it highlights how few places are truly walkable. "When you and I go to New York, you and I go to Manhattan," Mr. Leinberger said. "But the entire region consists of four states with a density that is less than Los Angeles."

"Most of the urbanism is in the central city. You get out of the center city, and it's super suburban."

The right mix

Those characteristics define Uptown Dallas, an amalgamation of high-rent apartments, eateries and upscale retail where city dwellers can get a beer and a burger, their dry-cleaning, some groceries and a haircut – all by taking a short walk.

The same could be said of Addison Circle, a mix of trendy development within sight of the Dallas North Tollway and Addison Airport.

Meanwhile, national experts routinely cite Plano's Legacy Town Center as a blueprint on how to implant city conveniences into the heart of wide-open suburbia.

The development is an island of city life in the midst of subdivisions, corporate campuses and Texas prairie.

"I can sleep, eat and work all within a minute's walk," said Andy Clark, 57, a physician who was recently walking his golden retriever, Fern. "I'd hate to give up that convenience."

Casey McArdle, a 26-year-old tax accountant, said her car often collects dust on weekends: "On the weekends, I don't even have to leave here," she said.

Experts say such developments reach their full potential only if residents and shoppers have alternatives to driving.

Uptown Dallas has access to the DART rail line, buses, a free trolley car and hiker-biker trails. Legacy residents don't have similar options.

"Unless there's alternative ways to get to an urban center, you're likely creating a place where people will drive there to walk around," said David Goldberg, communications director for Smart Growth America, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit coalition that promotes sound planning.

The Dallas area will probably keep its reputation of being car-centric as long as places like Uptown and Legacy remain experiments rather than the norm, experts say.

Joanie Sanchez, Irving-based author of *60 Hikes Within 60 Miles: Dallas, Fort Worth*, said alternatives exist even in the sprawling suburbs, such as hiking trails and bike paths.

"Our reputation is fair, but if you look closer, there are alternatives," she said. "There are a lot of areas that are much more walkable than you might think."