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Realestate

Metro areas are getting more walkable, one foot at a time

By Roger K. Lewis
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With the explosion of development in District neighborhoods such as the Wharf; the corridors along 14th, U and H streets; and the Tysons Corner and Pike & Rose communities in the suburbs, it's no secret that walkability is a top priority for home buyers and renters as well as for office and retail tenants.

So it should come as no surprise that Washington is the No. 2 most walkable metropolitan area in the United States, second only to New York, according to studies by the Center for Real Estate and Urban Analysis (CREUA) of the George Washington University School of Business.

Following Washington in the CREUA rankings are metropolitan Boston, Chicago, San Francisco and Seattle. Among the least walkable and most auto-dependent are Houston, Dallas, Las Vegas, Phoenix, San Diego and Orlando.

According to CREUA chair and research professor Christopher Leinberger, a leading proponent of walkable urbanism, metropolitan Washington is the nation's premier model for creating innovative, pedestrian-oriented urban and suburban development.

Citizens of metropolitan Washington should feel especially honored to be considered the country's leader in urbanism innovation, as we are rarely perceived as a leading innovator in other spheres.

Walkable urban places — termed "WalkUPs" — are gaining market share over auto-dependent suburban competition. WalkUPs (not to be confused with walk-up apartment buildings) exhibit substantially higher rental premiums and demographically higher levels of education, wealth and social equitability.

Attributes of walkable urban development include higher densities; mixed land uses encompassing office, retail and multifamily housing; innovative types of functionally blended real estate, such as apartment units atop retail stores; and multiple transportation options — walking, biking and public transit, in addition to driving cars.

Moreover, WalkUPs exist in suburbs as well as in central cities. In fact, urbanizing suburbia, an increasingly dominant real estate development trend, is especially robust throughout the capital region. Tysons Corner and North Bethesda typify places where conventional commercial real estate — such as strip malls — is being reimagined as contemporary living, working and shopping spaces.

WalkUPs in metropolitan Washington are taking shape, or already exist, in the District, Arlington, Alexandria and the surrounding suburban counties — Fairfax, Loudoun, Montgomery and Prince George's.

Reston Town Center is a laudable example of walkable, urbanized suburbia. Urbanizing plans and rezoning, already approved by Howard County, will transform the suburban-style Town Center of Columbia, Md.

A few WalkUPs in this region are being created from scratch on green or brown fields. But most involve revitalization of underperforming sites and real estate. The Wharf in the District, White Flint and Wheaton in Montgomery County, and Potomac Yards in Alexandria exemplify walkable urban development.

WalkUPs are nothing new. Proponents and practitioners of New Urbanism have advocated walkable urban development, especially within suburbs, for decades. In fact, New Urbanism is really old, traditional urbanism. Until the 20th century and ubiquitous automobile dependency, American towns and cities were necessarily and inevitably walkable.

Creating WalkUPs entails three fundamental strategies: establishing a master framework plan based on a comprehensible street-block pattern; enabling an environmentally and economically feasible mix of office, retail and residential uses and densities; and forming properly proportioned, attractive sidewalks, streets and civic open spaces that make walking functionally convenient, pleasurable and aesthetically desirable.

But rather than focusing on design, CREUA research explores economic, demographic, social and functional attributes of WalkUPs. Real-world data establishes quantitative thresholds and key metrics pertaining to comparative metropolitan growth and economic performance, as well as social equity. The latter gauges affordability of housing, transportation costs and access to jobs.

Economic analysis of WalkUPs in America's 30 largest metro areas is especially noteworthy. Real estate prices in WalkUPs are significantly higher than in auto-dependent suburban real estate. For example, compared to such suburban development, rental premiums in walkable urban places have been as high as 90 percent for office development, 71 percent for retail and 66 percent for multifamily apartments.

It's widely acknowledged that rising real estate values and housing costs threaten to gentrify historically affordable, center-city residential neighborhoods. But researchers claim that social equity is attainable for moderate-income households within WalkUPs because higher housing costs can be offset by lower transportation costs — less ownership and use of cars — and better job opportunities.

Given higher values and that investment returns that WalkUPs support, it's also no surprise that, in America's 30 largest metro areas, the market share of walkable urban office and apartment development is rising while market share of offices and apartments in auto-dependent suburban development is decreasing. That is further evidence of increasing suburban urbanization and accelerating central-city revitalization.

In many of the 30 largest metro areas, WalkUPs occupy only about 1 percent of metropolitan land area yet account for the majority of new office and multifamily rental development. And even with small land occupancy percentages, WalkUPs contribute substantially to municipal and county tax revenue because of higher densities, levels of employment and personal incomes.

Building walkable communities in American cities and suburbs promises to enhance mobility choices and yield greater economic benefits. But additional benefits accrue. Such communities, and the cities they occupy, will be more socially diverse, culturally richer and more environmentally sustainable for future generations.

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