

San Francisco Chronicle

S.F. a step ahead as most 'walkable' U.S. city

James Temple, Chronicle Staff Writer

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(07-16) 19:30 PDT -- If you or your loved one is struggling to break the cycle of fossil fuel addiction, San Francisco may just be your Betty Ford Center.

The city by the bay is the most "walkable" in the nation, according to rankings set for release today by WalkScore.com, a service designed to help those seeking a less automobile-dependent life. The distinction encompasses a host of environmental, health and economic advantages.

WalkScore, a division of Seattle software company Front Seat, evaluated the 40 largest U.S. cities based on residents' proximity to grocery stores, coffee shops, restaurants, movie theaters and other amenities. Hills were not taken into account in the rankings, just distance and concentration.

San Francisco scored an 86 out of 100, besting New York's 83 and Boston's 79. Seventeen of San Francisco's neighborhoods ranked 90 or above - considered a "walker's paradise" - including Chinatown, the Mission, Nob Hill and Haight-Ashbury.

"That says that San Francisco isn't just isolated pockets of walkability, but broad swaths," said Mike Mathieu, chairman and founder of Front Seat. "If you live and work in San Francisco, you know this. It means it's easier to get around, even with the hills."

The ability to conveniently travel by foot to services and jobs matters for a number of reasons. Studies show it means people get more exercise, drive fewer miles and consequently spend less on gas and produce fewer greenhouse emissions. Walkability also means there are people on the sidewalks, in stores and at restaurants, making neighborhoods livelier and, for many, more attractive.

"It's both healthy for the Earth and for humans to be able to walk to most of the places they need," said Kate White, executive director of the San Francisco office of the Urban Land Institute, a planning group. "Your carbon footprint is significantly lower than someone who has to drive everywhere ... and you're able to have real neighborhoods where you're not totally separated from your neighbors."

That in part explains why growing numbers of people are willing to pay more for smaller homes in dense neighborhoods than big ones in sprawling suburbs. Developers have taken notice of such trends, with many increasingly focusing on so-called urban infill projects.

A recent report by home price site Zillow.com found that, generally, the farther from San Francisco that homes are located in the region, the further values have dropped amid the real estate downturn. Within a 10-mile radius, prices fell 7 percent from a year ago in the first quarter. Values declined 14.1 percent and 16.2 percent in the 10- to 20-mile radius and 20- to 30-mile radius, respectively.

Providing what market wants

The attractiveness of dense neighborhoods with plenty to do is also a key reason young professionals are flocking to cities, a trend that businesses are keeping in mind when choosing locations, said Christopher Leinberger, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington, D.C., who sits on WalkScore's advisory board.

"You are providing more of what the market wants than most other metro markets in the country," he said. "I personally think it explains why San Francisco for the last 20 years has been as successful as it has been as a metro economy."

Still, he said regional leaders and planners should resist the urge to pat themselves on the back.

In his own study on the walkability of 30 metropolitan areas, as opposed to cities, the Bay Area came out third, scoring well below the greater Washington, D.C., and Boston regions on key criteria. Leinberger, author of "The Option of Urbanism: Investing in a New American Dream," specifically criticized the region's lack of concentrated construction near many of the public transportation hubs.

"You probably have 50 places in the San Francisco Bay Area that could become high-density, walkable urban places," he said. "If you give a damn about what the market wants and give a damn about climate change, the highest priority in the Bay Area should be to up-zone those areas."

Part of real estate listings

Given the growing interest in walkability, Mathieu believes that such scores will soon become a standard part of real estate listings, right next to the number of bedrooms and bathrooms. So far, users have looked up rankings for more than 2 million addresses on the site, which began last July. In addition to the scores, searches produce maps with icons representing stores, parks, gyms, pharmacies, schools and other amenities.

Siddharth Ram, 41, said WalkScore was indispensable in helping him find a new home when he decided to move to the South Bay from San Diego, where he was forced to drive for almost every errand and outing. He wouldn't take a second glance at listings with scores below 50 and was quickly able to determine the amenities near potential homes.

"I think it's amazing," he said. "It helped me narrow down the places I really wanted to look at."

Last month, he and his family moved into a three-bedroom house with a walk score of 59 in Menlo Park, less than a mile from downtown Palo Alto. If money were no object, he would have preferred something more walkable still, but Ram can easily stroll to stores and restaurants and bike to his software development job in Mountain View.

Mathieu, a former Microsoft executive, describes Front Seat as a civic software company. It is organized as a for-profit business, generating some advertising and other revenue, but focuses on social issues, including sustainability, local communities and government transparency.

"I sold my Internet publishing company about 18 months ago and wanted to use the proceeds of that to really explore and experiment with the idea that software is so cheap now that you can invest in things with a social return, not just a cash return," he said.

To find out how your home rates for walkability, punch in your address at www.walkscore.com.

The best crosstown walks

Despite its hills (or maybe because of them) San Francisco has long been considered a walker's paradise. In 2004, former Chronicle staffer Tom Graham shared some of his favorite routes across town:

Market Street to Ocean Beach: 8.3 miles. Start at the Embarcadero, and head up Market to Castro, then over Upper Market to Portola Drive (look back over your shoulder at the great view), then down to Sloat Boulevard and out to Ocean Beach.

Sacramento Street to the Cliff House: 7.2 miles. Start at the Ferry Building, and walk across Justin Herman Plaza to Sacramento Street. Follow Sacramento all the way to Arguello Boulevard, where it turns into Lake Street. Follow Lake along the edge of the Presidio past Mountain Lake to El Camino del Mar and the edge of Lincoln Park. Continue on trail at the end of El Camino del Mar to Observation Point and the Cliff House.

Presidio to Mission Dolores: 3 miles. Start at the Presidio's Lombard Gate at Lyon Street, and follow Lyon up and over Pacific Heights, through the Panhandle to the top of Buena Vista Park, then to the top of Corona Heights and down 16th Street to Mission Dolores.

Presidio to Portsmouth Square: 2.5 miles. Start at the Presidio's Lombard Gate (at Lyon), and follow Greenwich Street to the top of Telegraph Hill, then down Kearny Street to Portsmouth Square (at Washington) in Chinatown.

Golden Gate Park at the Great Highway to Market Street: 6 miles. Start at Ocean Beach and hook onto Kennedy Drive for a pastoral stroll through one of the biggest urban parks in the world, pass the Chain of Lakes and Spreckels Lake through Lindley Meadows, go up Stanyan to Haight and down Haight to Market.

Most, least Walkable cities

(with score from WalkScore.com)

Top 5

San Francisco: 86

New York: 83

Boston: 79

Chicago: 76

Philadelphia: 74

Bottom 5

Jacksonville: 36

Nashville: 39

Charlotte: 39

Indianapolis: 42

Oklahoma City: 43*

Most, least walkable parts of S.F.

* Indicates tie with other cities or neighborhoods

Top 5

Chinatown: 99

Financial District: 99

Downtown: 98

North Beach: 98

Mission District: 96*

Bottom 5

Lakeshore: 66

Visitacion Valley: 70

Twin Peaks: 70

Crocker-Amazon: 70

Outer Sunset: 72*

E-mail James Temple at jtemple@sfchronicle.com.

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