

Sidewalks critical to Topeka quality of life, economic development

By Morgan Chilson

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“Walkability” may be the buzzword of economic development for this decade. Everyone from economic development directors to land-use specialists to city mayors looks to create walkable cities designed to appeal to millennials, young families and active retired couples.

Walkability means interconnectedness and easy access throughout a city, and that means walkable access to retail, housing and work.

“Younger people today want to work, live and play in the same neighborhood, and it makes sense,” said Mayor Larry Wolgast. “They want sidewalks, to walk around the block — and if I were that age, that’s where I would be. The way we’ve built things now, you have to get in the car to do anything.”

Cities nationwide are focusing on creating walkable neighborhoods, and land-use expert Christopher B. Leinberger, of the Brookings Institute, sees it as a pivotal shift in urban design.

“The \$64,000 question that everybody has is, so what’s going to happen when the millennials get married and have kids, and where will they go,” Leinberger said. “My answer to that is that most of them, not all, some will stay downtown, will go to the walkable urban suburbs that are evolving as well.”

Sidewalks are a key to walkability in a community.

“People, not only do they want to walk more, but they are actually looking for places that are walkable,” said Bill Fiander, director of the city of Topeka Planning Department. “The millennial generation certainly fits that category. It is a quality of life, and it is an expectation now that we want walkable

neighborhoods and connected neighborhoods and communities. We want to connect the priority areas to schools, to bus stops, to parks, to business areas and shopping areas.”

Wolgast pointed to a 10-foot sidewalk put in along Gage Park, between 6th and 10th streets on S.W. Gage Boulevard, that is usable for walkers and bikers.

“There was no sidewalk, and you had this fantastic Gage Park, and you could hardly bike,” he said. “This is what we’re doing when people have questions about why do you spend money on trails. That sidewalk is 10 feet wide and for bicycles too. Now, all of a sudden, you see bicycles there. People have commented to me, ‘Isn’t that a great idea?’ We’re just now doing things like that to make the city more livable.”

The placement of sidewalks has changed over the decades. Fiander said an aerial view of the capital city would show almost concentric rings delineating different thinking.

“The core of the city has got sidewalks, and then the middle circle doesn’t have them because we didn’t require them probably from post-war World War II housing developments up until maybe through the 1960s,” he said. “Developers would put them in when they wanted to, but they weren’t required.”

Today, sidewalks feed into economic development.

“It is quality of life, and we also think it makes us more economically competitive because this is what will attract a younger family, a younger generation, and if we don’t have that to compete with, they’re going to look at us as not being very progressive and not being what they want,” Fiander said.

A Pedestrian Master Plan adopted this year sets goals for Topeka’s walkability. It also required that developers “guarantee” that a sidewalk goes in either when the street is built or within a reasonable time after the first home is built in a subdivision, Fiander said.

Although some developers have complained that putting a sidewalk in early means it will get torn up as homes are developed, Fiander said the city is willing to work with them to set appropriate timing. The goal, he added, is to make sure neighborhoods have sidewalks.

In the past, he said, the practice has been for the homebuilder to put in the sidewalk. The challenge had been that if some lots didn't sell in a subdivision, the sidewalk would have gaps in front of those lots.

Developers can put the sidewalks in as they put in the streets or, if they choose not to, they will have a couple of years to add them as houses are built.

"We'll come to some agreement through the benefit district that you create to say that you will put in the sidewalk with the homes," Fiander said. "If you do not put in all your homes within a certain amount of time, then you will give us a guarantee in some form of security bond or some form of cash that is deposited with us or through a bank, so we can use that to finish the sidewalks."

Fiander said about 69 percent of the arterial, or busy, streets have sidewalks on both sides.

"But there are some glaring areas, busy streets, that do not have sidewalks," he said. "As we reconstruct streets over the next 10 years and do projects, we will be adding sidewalks on all of those. Of all the projects that we know that we are going to do, at least at this point, we will get that number up to about 79 percent after 12 years."