

# Tampa Tribune

## Downtown Must Walk The Walk

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The Brookings Institution, the Washington, D.C.-based think tank, released a survey of the top 30 metropolitan areas regarding the ranking on the per capita number of regionally significant walkable urban places in their regions. The results for the Tampa-St. Petersburg area - dead last.

There was not one place in the region where you could live, work and play within walking distance that is at critical mass. Certainly there are many places that are up and coming; downtown St Petersburg, Ybor City, the Channel District, Hyde Park and, of course, downtown Tampa.

Why is this important? The knowledge-based economy and the market want it, and you are not providing it. Consumer research shows that 30 to 40 per cent of households want to live in or within walking distance of a walkable urban place. The demographics of the next 20 years overwhelmingly favor walkable urban development. Most convincingly, the shortage of walkable urban product throughout many metro areas nationally has resulted in a 40 to 200 percent price premium per square foot for walkable urban products.

In sun-drenched Tampa, why would that affect your economic future? You will not retain or attract those households that want a walkable urban lifestyle or those businesses that work best in such an environment. This is particularly the case with young adults who are leading this trend. They were raised on "Seinfeld" and "Sex and the City," not "Leave it to Beaver."

What can you do to escape the cellar?

First, since the Brookings survey showed a strong connection between walkable urban development and rail transit, extend your trolley line from the convention center to downtown Tampa.

That will link three emerging walkable urban places, such as Ybor City, the Channel District and downtown. People living and working in those three places, as well as much of Harbor Island, will much more easily get about without a car.

These folks might be able to drop a car out of their household budget, investing the savings into their taxpaying home. Keep in mind that the average annual cost of a car supports an additional \$120,000 mortgage.

Second, focus more effort on restaurants, retail and residential in these walkable urban places. Downtown in particular should get to critical mass during the next real estate upturn, which will start an upward spiral of value creation for property owners and government entities.

Third, lay the groundwork for a light rail system to serve the region. Learn from the recent trip your civic leadership took to "your" light rail system you "gave" to Charlotte five years ago. It is

now up and running and they will reap significant benefits as billions of dollars' worth of new development will be taking place around the 35 new stations.

Don't make that mistake again. You and Detroit are the only major metro areas in the country without a rail transit system - and they are planning one.

Tampa should congratulate itself on the new initiatives that are coming out of the ground: the art, children's and history museums, the Riverwalk, the new parks, the conversion of one-way to two-way streets, among others. However, there is much more to do to raise your rankings and become more economically viable.

There should be at least eight to 10 regionally significant walkable urban places developing in the region over the next 20 years, and you have a start on at least five right now. However, if you do not accelerate your efforts, you will continue to fall behind metro areas like Phoenix, Dallas and Charlotte.

These emerging cities see the knowledge-based economy demand for walkable urban development and are taking much more aggressive action to provide it.

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