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Walkable Urban Places Gain on Suburbs

GW researchers say transportation savings and increased job opportunities have made urban centers in the 30 largest U.S. metro areas more equitable for low-income earners.

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By Kristen Mitchell

For the first time since cars, quieter streets and spacious homes lured people out of city centers and into suburban towns, people are moving back downtown and demand for mixed-use space is growing, a George Washington University researcher has found.

A new report, "Foot Traffic Ahead: Ranking Walkable Urbanism in America's Largest Metros (http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/foot-traffic-ahead.pdf)," studied walkable urbanism in the 30 largest U.S. metro areas. The research concluded that for the first time in possibly 60 years, office, retail and multi-family occupied rental space has a greater market share than drivable suburbs.

"This is a sea change in how we invest 35 percent of our wealth," said Christopher Leinberger, the Charles Bendit Distinguished Scholar and Research Professor and Chair of the Center for Real Estate and Urban Analysis at the George Washington University School of Business (http://business.gwu.edu/about-us/research/center-for-real-estate-urban-analysis/).

Mr. Leinberger published the research with Director of Research for Smart Growth America Michael Rodriguez.

The six metro areas with the most walkable urban space are: New York City, Washington, D.C., Boston, Chicago, San Francisco and Seattle.

Suburban areas have the best opportunity to expand walkability and meet the growing demand, the research shows. The Washington, D.C., metro area is a model example, with 47 percent of walkable urban square footage in the suburbs compared to 53 percent in the city center.

"Walkable urban takes place both in the center city and in the suburbs," Mr. Leinberger said. "The old distinction between city and suburbs, we find obsolete."

Walkable urban places are desirable places to live for millennials in particular, Mr. Leinberger said. The 30 metro areas studied represent 46 percent of the United States' population and 54 percent of its real gross domestic product in 2014.

In high-ranked regions like New York City and Washington, D.C., the GDP per capita was higher than those determined to be less walkable, such as Orlando and Phoenix, and residents were more likely to have a bachelor's degree.

While people living in these walkable areas tend to pay a higher percentage of their income in rent, there is a trade off. They tend to spend a lower share on transportation and have access to two to three times more employment opportunities. Research showed that more walkable areas had more social equity and afford more opportunities for those who make 80 percent of the average median income.

In New York City, residents are spending 47 percent of their income on housing and 17 percent on transportation. However in Orlando, which ranked at the bottom for social equity, residents spend 45 percent of their income on housing, but 31 percent on transportation. Mr. Leinberger called the findings counterintuitive.

"We still have a responsibility to address affordable housing," Mr. Leinberger said. "Let's address the issue but also recognize walkable urban places help people."

While there is a demand for more walkable space in all of the 30 metro areas studied, Mr. Leinberger said many living in the suburbs are resistant to change because of a "fear of an old boogeyman," the idea that development means strip malls that create traffic and crowd high-performing schools.

Younger people, however, move into walkable places and pay local taxes without sending children to the school district, Mr. Leinberger said. Also, city-like hubs often encourage people to seek out public transit. He used Arlington, Va., a suburb of Washington, D.C., as the model example for this.

"There is a great concern that density is going to destroy community quality," Mr. Leinberger said, "which we now know is just the opposite."

Some low-ranking cities on the list are taking steps to increase their walkability. Los Angeles, Mr. Leinberger said, has put billions of dollars into its rail system and is undergoing heavy construction that has encouraged developers to expand in proximity to metro stations.

Los Angeles had one of the best rail systems in the world in the 1940s, but it became largely obsolete as personal cars became more attainable for the middle class. The city is currently

undergoing a massive project to restore a functioning rail system throughout the region.

"They've come to the realization that they can't build any additional freeways to move people," Mr. Leinberger said.

Companies are taking note and are moving operations from office parks to walkable urban places. General Electric Co. announced earlier this year it would move from suburban Connecticut to Boston, and Motorola announced a similar move from suburban Illinois to downtown Chicago in September.

"If you want to be hip and in the knowledge economy, you want to be in a walkable, urban place," Mr. Leinberger said.

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