

# Sidewalks | A LIVABILITY FACT SHEET

Eight in 10 Americans prefer being in a community that offers sidewalks and good places to walk. Six in 10 prefer a neighborhood that features a mix of houses, shops and services within an easy walk versus a neighborhood that requires a car for every errand.<sup>1</sup>

People who live in neighborhoods with sidewalks are 47 percent more likely than residents of areas without sidewalks to be active at least 39 minutes a day.<sup>2</sup>

Sidewalks play a vital role in community life. As conduits for pedestrian movement and access, they enhance connectivity and promote walking. As public spaces, sidewalks are the front steps to the community, activating streets socially and economically.

Safe, accessible, well-maintained sidewalks are a fundamental community investment that enhances public health and maximizes social capital.<sup>3</sup>

Sidewalks increase foot traffic in retail centers, delivering the customers that local shops and restaurants need in order to thrive. Retail properties with a Walk Score ranking of 80 out of 100 were valued 54 percent higher than those with a Walk Score<sup>4</sup> of 20 and had an increase in net operating income of 42 percent.<sup>5</sup>

Interest in sidewalks is so keen that they've become a factor in home prices. For example, in a scenario where two houses are nearly identical, the one with a five-foot-wide sidewalk and two street trees not only sells for \$4,000 to \$34,000 more but it also sells in less time.

A well-constructed sidewalk for a typical 50-foot-wide residential property might cost a builder \$2,000, but it can return 15 times that investment in resale value. According to a 2009 CEOs for Cities report, even a one-point increase in a community's Walk Score could increase home values by \$700 to \$3,000.<sup>6</sup>

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Good downtown sidewalks have enough room for people to walk, stop and talk, or even sit for a bit. This wide sidewalk in State College, Pa., is made of visually appealing paver stones. Care must be taken when installing paver and similar surfaces so wheelchairs and other wheeled devices can roll smoothly over them.

# Myth-Busting!

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## ■ “No one will use the sidewalk.”

This might have been true in the past, but research published in 2012 by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention<sup>7</sup> (CDC) and in 2013 by the National Center for Safe Routes to School<sup>8</sup> shows that a growing number of people are walking, and that many are children and adults age 65 and older.

People just need safe, convenient and pleasant places near their homes, schools and workplaces to make walking routine, says the CDC study.

## ■ “Americans prefer to drive.”

Perhaps, or maybe they’re driving so much because there are no sidewalks! Federal data on vehicle miles traveled and a recent national study show a decline in driving and car ownership during the 2000s in an overwhelming majority of metro areas.

At the same time, the number of people commuting by bicycle and transit increased.<sup>9</sup> A survey by the Surface Transportation Policy Partnership found that 55 percent of Americans would prefer to walk more and drive less.<sup>10</sup>

## ■ “Trees will be destroyed.”

Not necessarily. Sidewalks can be curved to avoid trees. In fact, protecting a tree is one of the few reasons for a sidewalk to deviate from a direct route.<sup>11</sup>

## ■ “A sidewalk will take land from my lawn.”

Many homeowners don’t realize how far from the curb their private property line actually extends. There’s often enough of a public right-of-way easement in place to create a sidewalk without infringing in any way on a property owner’s land.<sup>12</sup>

## ■ “People will walk too close to my house.”

There’s little difference between what passersby can see from a sidewalk versus what they can already see from their cars or by walking along the edge of the street. Any nearness added by a sidewalk would likely be as little as a just a few feet.<sup>13</sup>

## ■ “Sidewalks increase crime.”

Actually, increased pedestrian activity puts more eyes on the street and creates safety in numbers, which deters and reduces criminal activity.<sup>14</sup>

## ■ “Tax dollars are better spent on other needs.”

Since sidewalks increase property values and tax revenues, they serve as an economic engine. Plus, sidewalk maintenance costs are real estate tax-deductible (IRS Publication 530). Sidewalks are also safety investments (by bringing more eyes and ears to the street) and an integral part of a balanced transportation budget.<sup>15</sup>

## ■ “I’ll be liable if someone gets hurt on a sidewalk near my property.”

It depends. Liability is determined by state and local law, but either government or private owner negligence concerning an “unreasonably safe” or “defective condition” (such as a wide crack or raised section) has to be proven in court in order to win a lawsuit.<sup>16</sup>

## ■ “Sidewalks ruin the character of rural neighborhoods.”

It’s only in recent decades that sidewalks have been phased out of developments. There are many ways to build a sidewalk or path to match the design and feel of a community.

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1. National Association of Realtors. (November 2013) National Community Preference Survey. <http://www.realtor.org/articles/nar-2013-community-preference-survey>
  2. Sallis J., et al. “Neighborhood Environments and Physical Activity among Adults in 11 countries.” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, Vol. 36, No.2
  3. National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO). (October 2012) *Urban Street Design Guide* pp 24-25. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/2012-nacto-urban-street-design-guide.pdf>
  4. Walk Score® is an online logarithmic ranking system that determines the basic walkability of a residential or commercial property. Walk Score uses neighborhood factors such as distance to shops and schools to create a number between 0 and 100 that measures the walkability of any address <http://www.walkscore.com>
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  10. Surface Transportation Policy Project, Belden Russonello & Stewart. (April 2003) *Americans' Attitudes Toward Walking and Creating Better Walking Communities*. [http://www.transact.org/library/reports\\_pdfs/pedpoll.pdf](http://www.transact.org/library/reports_pdfs/pedpoll.pdf). Whetmore, J.Z. “Retrofit Sidewalks.” *Perils for Pedestrians Public Affairs Series* (November 2012) Retrieved March 3, 2014 <http://www.pedestrians.org/retrofit/retrofit15.htm>
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  12. Ibid

# How To Get It Right



The ideal sidewalk widths: seven feet in residential areas, eight to 12 feet in downtown settings.



Sidewalks that are properly built can last 25 years or more with little more than minimal care.

## When advocating and planning for sidewalks, consider the following:

### ■ Engage neighbors and the community

Expect some opposition and use this fact sheet to help make the case for the sidewalks. Mobilize like-minded people and work together as a neighborhood or community. Meet with your neighbors to raise awareness and address any resistance.

### ■ Make the sidewalk wide enough

Sidewalks are critical in downtown neighborhoods and busy retail areas, both of which have lots of people, destinations and potential conflicts with vehicles. In these areas it's important to install sidewalks that are wide enough to handle foot traffic and features such as cafe seating, benches and other spots for socializing.

### ■ Use a site-appropriate design

A sidewalk should fit its setting. Even rural communities can benefit from a tastefully designed walkway. Make sure sidewalks are well-maintained and appealing, with safe and convenient street crossings and enough width to accommodate two or three people walking side by side.

The ideal setback for a sidewalk is four to 10 feet from the street. Planter strips, trees and on-street parking can extend the buffer, increasing comfort and slowing traffic.

### ■ Prioritize high-use areas and connectivity

At the outset of a sidewalk construction program, prioritize where to build first by focusing on a quarter-mile circle around schools, parks, transit stops and key commercial destinations. Everything within that circle should be a priority for sidewalk construction. Be sure to map sidewalks so they're connected between the primary areas where people work, shop and play.

### ■ Consider driveways

In many neighborhoods and retail areas, driveways are full of both moving and parked cars. Since driveways interrupt a sidewalk's flow and safety, they should be kept to a minimum in commercial areas.

Carefully plan the best way to treat sidewalks that will cross driveways, especially in high-use areas. Alleys are a good tool for separating people from traffic, especially in retail areas.

### ■ Build and maintain with municipal funds

Many communities require property owners to pay for and clear sidewalks (snow, ice, etc.). Since sidewalks are a public benefit, a better policy would be to install and maintain sidewalks with public funds.

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13. Ibid  
14. Berg, D. (N.D.) "Sidewalk Slip and Fall: Who is Liable?" NOLO. <http://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/sidewalk-slip-fall-who-liable.html>  
15. Rails to Trails Conservancy, National Park Service. (January 1998) *Rail-trails and Safe Communities: The Experience on 372 Trails*. [http://www.railstotrails.org/resources/documents/resource\\_docs/Safe%20Communities\\_F\\_lr.pdf](http://www.railstotrails.org/resources/documents/resource_docs/Safe%20Communities_F_lr.pdf)  
16. Federal Highway Administration. (N.D.) *Pedestrian Safety Guide and Countermeasure Selection System*. [http://www.pedbikesafe.org/PEDSAFE/resources\\_guidelines\\_sidewalkwalkways.cfm](http://www.pedbikesafe.org/PEDSAFE/resources_guidelines_sidewalkwalkways.cfm)

# Success Stories

## ■ Decatur, Georgia: Citywide Sidewalk Program

Decatur has been dubbed the most walkable city in Georgia, with more than 60 miles of sidewalks in its 4.2 square miles. The ongoing, citywide sidewalk improvement program began in 2004 with a Health Impact Assessment and funding from annual appropriations by the Decatur City Commission.

The program's goal is to have a sidewalk on at least one side of every street in town. More than four miles of new and replacement sidewalks had been built by 2014.

## ■ Austin, Texas: Sidewalk Prioritization

The City of Austin has built almost 100 miles of new sidewalks since 2005 to encourage walking as a viable mode of transportation and to improve safety, accessibility and pedestrian mobility.

Austin completed a detailed sidewalk inventory, documented current conditions, obtained public input on sidewalk needs and issues, and established city sidewalk priorities that were organized into a downloadable Sidewalk Prioritization Map. The city prioritizes compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, sidewalks that allow children to walk safely to school, a connected network of sidewalks, trails and bikeway, and sidewalks that serve bus stops. More than 300 bus stop sidewalks have been completed since 2011.

## ■ Calloway County, Kentucky: School Sidewalks

Walking or bicycling to school was prohibited in and around the small city of Murray because there were no sidewalks and it wasn't a safe way to travel. The local government offered to build sidewalks if the school system would change the policy. The effort resulted in 15,960 feet of sidewalks, including from the county middle school to a low-income housing area. Hundreds

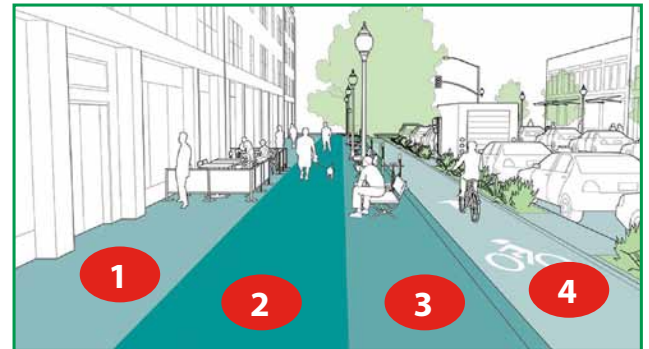
of students now regularly walk to school.

"Every time I look down the street, there are people on the sidewalks, people pulling wagons, people walking their dogs," said a school district administrator.

## HOW IT WORKS

Design guidelines recommend a minimum sidewalk cross section of five feet, exclusive of other amenities and large enough for at least two people to walk side by side. Here's a guide to the potential spaces alongside a property.

- 1. Frontage Zone:** an extension of the building
- 2. Pedestrian Through Zone:** safe and adequate place for walking, five to seven feet wide in residential areas, eight to 12 feet in downtown or commercial settings
- 3. Street Furniture/Curb Zone:** plants, trees, benches, lighting and bike parking to provide a protective barrier from motorized traffic
- 4. Enhancement/Buffer Zone:** curb extensions, parklets, parking, bike riding, bike e-racks and bike stations



National Association of City Transportation Officials, Urban Street Design Guide, nacto.org

## RESOURCES

- Los Angeles County Model Design Manual for Living Streets.** (2011) <http://www.modelstreetdesignmanual.com/>
- Advanced Sidewalks and Streets Toolkit.** AARP. (2011) <http://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/livable-communities/plan/assessments/advanced-streets-and-sidewalks-toolkit-2011-aarp.pdf>
- Costs for Pedestrian and Bicyclist Infrastructure Improvements.** Bushell, M., et al. UNC Highway Safety Research Center, Federal Highway Administration. (October 2013) [http://katana.hsrc.unc.edu/cms/downloads/Countermeasure%20Costs\\_Report\\_Nov2013.pdf](http://katana.hsrc.unc.edu/cms/downloads/Countermeasure%20Costs_Report_Nov2013.pdf)
- Walkability, Real Estate and Public Health Data,** Walk Score Data Services, <http://www.walkscore.com/professional/research.php>
- Sidewalks and Streets Survey.** [http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/provencountermeasures/fhwa\\_sa\\_12\\_013.htm](http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/provencountermeasures/fhwa_sa_12_013.htm)
- Business Performance in Walkable Shopping Areas.** Active Living Research. (November 2009) [http://activelivingresearch.org/files/BusinessPerformanceWalkableShoppingAreas\\_Nov2013.pdf](http://activelivingresearch.org/files/BusinessPerformanceWalkableShoppingAreas_Nov2013.pdf)
- Walk Score blog** at <http://blog.walkscore.com/>



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