

## **Can we walk?**

**By Kristan Cockerill**

In post-World War II America, the car became the driving force behind city planning and design. This had numerous unintended consequences, including the loss of traditional downtown businesses, decreased levels of physical activity, and environmental degradation. Now many U.S. cities are trying to redress these problems by returning to a more “walkable” environment.

There is strong evidence that walkable cities provide economic, safety, environmental, and health benefits to their residents. Walkable cities focus on people, not cars. They integrate mass transit, mixed-use development, and pedestrian-friendly streets. They offer public spaces for people to interact, and they accommodate all the people in the community.

Because walkable cities have wide sidewalks, lower traffic speeds, and landscaped buffers that keep pedestrian traffic and car traffic segregated, there are fewer injuries and deaths. Well lit, busy walkways can also discourage crime.

Lack of physical activity contributes to numerous negative health conditions including obesity, heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and depression. The American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) reports numerous benefits from walking. “Hoofing it” just three hours a week can reduce the risk of heart disease for women by 30-40 percent. Being able to safely walk from home to work and/or to stores, restaurants, and other facilities enables people to get their exercise while completing their daily routines.

Entire communities reap environmental benefits by shifting to more walkable designs. Fewer cars mean less air and water pollution. Because walkable cities are designed for people, walkways typically include trees and flower boxes, which help to clean the air as well as provide a visually appealing place to be.

Finally, the economic benefits of becoming a walkable city are numerous. By focusing on pedestrians rather than cars, cities save money on infrastructure because they require fewer parking lots and less road surface. People are strongly attracted to walkable environments. Studies have found that property values in walkable cities can be as much as 20 percent higher than surrounding communities. There are case studies available showing that cities increase the number of businesses, decrease vacant properties, and increase tax revenues when they become more walkable. Additionally, these cities attract more tourists who appreciate the ambience and the safety of pedestrian-friendly communities.

Boone leaders have taken measures to make our community more walkable, but it is still largely a car-oriented city. There are opportunities to improve the city’s walkability, including adding more sidewalks and crosswalks, ensuring that the Howard Street renovation is designed for pedestrians, and continuing to support mass transit to limit cars in downtown.

For more information on walkable cities see Complete the Streets <[www.completethestreets.org](http://www.completethestreets.org)>  
or Walkable Communities, Inc. <[www.walkable.org](http://www.walkable.org)>