Joining America Walks opened my eyes

It’s a long path to genuine walkability for everyone

By David Dixon | January 28, 2019

Walking is clearly beneficial for people and communities, yet assuring walkability for everyone turns out to be a lot of (worthwhile) hard work

Who wouldn’t join the board of a group that promotes walking? It’s one thing that virtually everyone I encounter in my professional life - planners, urban designers, architects, landscape architects, engineers, transportation planners, city officials, developers, community activists - thinks is good and maybe even better than sustainability!

Everyone knows that making communities more walkable correlates with improved health, has the lightest environmental impact of any form of mobility, builds community by fostering human interaction, and - as an appropriate reward for these and other virtues - increases real estate values. (A 2016 study of 14 US cities found that, on average, a one-point rise in Walk Score raised the price of a home by $3,250, although the figure varied by city.) I confess I briefly wondered why America even needs an organization to promote walking.

Then I went to my first board meeting.

America Walks literally walks its talk. I found an organization led by extraordinarily thoughtful, committed, and pragmatic folks. This group has moved well beyond highlighting the benefits of walking to the surprisingly hard job of making walkability real, the harder job of making it accessible to all Americans, and perhaps hardest of all - the job of making sure walkability remains a high priority as rapidly evolving technologies promise big changes in how Americans move around.



This plan expands the historic downtown of Elkhart, Indiana, with a walkable new neighborhood of housing, stores, parks and a community center.

I quickly realized I was in the proverbial trenches with colleagues waging a never-ending campaign to protect and expand walkability. While they focus keenly on combating federal and state regulation that discourages walking, the real action comes in myriad local debates that focus not on walking per se, but on outcomes that can promote or - unintentionally - discourage walking. Recent actions include:

- seeking funding to build sidewalks in suburbs - and repair them in cities;
- making sure an endless list of proposed vehicle drop-offs, service entries, and outdoor dining don't obstruct walkability;
- finding ways to accommodate a long list of new travel modes - scooters, skateboards, and bikes - so that they don't become obstacles to walking;
- supporting safe sidewalks by arguing not just for nighttime lighting but also for programs to address social and economic tensions that invite crime;
- encouraging building owners to keep sidewalks appealing by quickly shoveling snow in cold climates and providing trees and canopies that shade pedestrians in hot ones;
- making the sometimes-controversial case for denser development - because density provides the people and disposable income that support the shops, cafés, culture, lively parks, and similar activities that bring sidewalks to life; and
- restraining the too-common impulse to erect blank walls or equally alienating parking garages along sidewalks.

If this sounds like a lot for one small organization to take on, it is. That's one reason America Walks sponsors a rigorous training program, the "Walking College," to constantly expand the network of effective walkability advocates across the country.

I got an even stronger sense of my fellow board members' passion when the agenda moved from place-specific advocacy to securing equitable access to walkability. America Walks' mission includes promoting access to walkability for people being left behind by growing economic disparities. America has developed a serious walkability gap. While cities proudly chronicle rising Walk Scores in revitalized downtowns and chic neighborhoods, the contrast with lower-income neighborhoods, in cities and suburbs alike, has grown starker.

These lower-income neighborhoods have lost the local stores and restaurants that once made their streets inviting and safe. That has discouraged walking and promoted driving. Walkability has declined, taking with it the health, social, and economic benefits of walking. In 2017 America Walks launched Walking Towards Justice, a webinar series examining "the intersectionality of mobility, race, class, gender, and politics" to educate decision-makers and advocates on the walkability gap and what we can do to close it.

My first board meeting ended with a robust confirmation that the reward for work well done is a more difficult task. Just as America Walks can claim significant national and local victories in expanding walkability and wider access to its benefits, a very different set of challenges has emerged. Ride hailing, electric scooters, and electric bikeshare programs don't just compete for sidewalk space, they offer seductive alternatives to walking that undercut the health, social, and economic benefits of walking even if they don't actually push us back into cars. And on the horizon, autonomous vehicles (AVs) threaten to create an even more enticing alternative to walking - on-demand trips anywhere without the nuisance of parking and costing less than a shared Uber or Lyft ride today.



Instead of a typical drive-only suburb, this greenfield site near Dallas will hold a walkable urban village built around plazas and tree-lined sidewalks.

Shared electric AVs may not clog our streets or foul our air, but neither do they support a simple, easy form of exercise, offer chance encounters with neighbors, or boost local businesses. America Walks has played a significant role in turning the tide of public opinion and the policy that follows toward walkability. Yet, rapidly evolving mobility options will pose new challenges.

The fight to make walking appealing - and protect the conditions that make it possible - isn't going away, and I'm looking forward to joining my America Walks colleagues in playing my small part in the battles to come.