TALKING ABOUT: THE WALKABLE COMMUNITY

Our physical environment can influence whether we walk, take public transit or drive. Research shows the number of people exercising is substantially higher in neighborhoods that are easy to get around by bicycle, wheelchair, public transit or on foot. Too many neighborhoods have high traffic volume, sidewalks that are broken or nonexistent, and large stretches of streets that are unlit at night. It's not much of a stretch to see how streets like this contribute to high rates of diabetes and other chronic diseases related to lack of physical activity.

What is a walkable community?

A neighborhood's "walkability" is a measure of how well it encourages physical activity. What does a walkable neighborhood look like? Ideally, it features a mix of housing, businesses, retail, schools and parks within walking distance so that people drive less and walk more. It includes even sidewalks or walking paths and good lighting so people feel safer getting around on foot, even after dark.

How does a walkable community make a difference?

Research has shown that:

- Physical activity levels significantly increased in neighborhoods with adequate sidewalks and bike lanes, particularly in low-income communities.¹
- Street networks that offer direct routes (a grid pattern where the streets interconnect easily, as opposed to having many cul de sacs or dead-end streets) can also increase walking, bicycling and use of public transit.^{2, 3}
- Adequate, safe routes to schools can increase the number of children walking to school.⁴

What can we do to create walkable communities?

We can ensure our communities make it easier for us to get to work or school, or even to run errands, by implementing smart land-use policies. This means improving places that have already been built and being smart about planning new environments.

Specific strategies include:

 Direct more funding toward walking/biking infrastructure. (One recent survey revealed that Americans would like 15 times more federal funding allocated for biking and walking. What's more, hundreds of miles of bike lanes and walking paths can be built for the cost of just one mile of a four-lane highway.⁵

- Improve street connectivity and create more pedestrian paths in sprawling communities.
- Expand public transit.
- Slow traffic to make streets safer for pedestrians and cyclists.
- Establish safe routes to school. (Visit www.saferoutestoschools.org for more information.)
- Invest in communities that are already walkable (e.g. repair sidewalks, add more street lighting).
- Increase support for mixed-use and compact zoning.

Berkeley Media Studies Group's "Talking About" series provides advocates with straightforward language on how our environment shapes our health, and what we can do to improve both. Supported in part by a grant from The California Endowment.

For more information, visit www.bmsg.org.

References

¹ Moudon, AV & Lee, C. (2003). Walking and bicycling: an evaluation of environmental audit instruments. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 18 (1), 21-37.

² Brownson, R., Hoener, C. & Brennan, L. (2004). Reliability of two instruments for auditing the environment for physical activity. *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*, 1, 191-208.

³ Greenwald, M. & Boarnet, M. (2001). Built environment as determinant of walking behavior: analyzing non-work pedestrian travel in Portland, Oregon. *Transportation Research Record*, 1780, 33-42.

⁴ Active Living Research (2008). Designing for active living among adults. Retrieved November 6, 2008 from http://www.activelivingresearch.org/files/Active_Adults.pdf

⁵ Greenwald. Op. cit.