



Walking in a Healthy Wonderland

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Believe it or not, winter is the perfect time to focus on the walkability of our neighborhoods. It often makes more sense to walk, if possible, than to drive on icy roads.

But the ease of getting from one place to the next by foot - the "walkability" of a community - is important no matter what the season. Walkability impacts neighborhoods, the environment and the health of residents.

This is the first in a series of reports by the Colorado Health Institute examining the built environment and its connection to health. We will delve into the building blocks of a healthy environment, evidence-based solutions to common barriers, what's going on in Colorado and how it all affects health.

So, what makes a community walkable?

If you can run most of your daily errands on foot, then your neighborhood is considered walkable. It seems simple, but think about where you go each day. Grocery stores, banks, the gym and many other daily destinations need to be within walking distance for a neighborhood to fit the definition. Walkable areas also need good sidewalks, crosswalks and stop signs as well as low traffic density.

The connection to health is important. Studies have shown that a walkable neighborhood decreases obesity rates and increases the daily physical activity of its residents.

Boulder and Denver are tied for Colorado's highest-ranked walkability score, according to Walk Score, a walkability index. Still, they manage only 56 of a possible 100. New York City, by comparison, has a walkability score of 87.6, the nation's highest. Pueblo

West is Colorado's least walkable city, with a score of six.

Neighborhoods in the same city often have very different walkability scores. Denver's most walkable neighborhoods are Lodo, the Golden Triangle and Capitol Hill, according to WalkScore. The least walkable are Stapleton, Green Valley Ranch and southwestern Denver.

But even though walkability is one key to better health, it's not always easy to achieve, especially in established communities. Often the sheer amount of traffic is an obstacle. Other barriers include a neighborhood's location - Colorado is a big state and cars are often necessary - and even opposition by residents to change.

And those aren't the only challenges. Finding a stable funding source is often difficult, depending on city policies. In Denver, for example, maintaining and

91

CHI's neighborhood
walkability score

Want to know how walkable your neighborhood is?

Check out WalkScore.com to see how your community matches up to others in your city. The website ranks communities on a scale of 0 to 100 for walkability where scores align with the latest research.

reconstructing sidewalks falls on the shoulders of private property owners, even if the sidewalk is used by the public.

But Westminster pays for sidewalk reconstruction through monthly utility taxes –\$6 per address or apartment. And Lakewood includes sidewalk construction and repair in its maintenance budget.

It is easy to envision a city that is entirely walkable. Europe has many examples. But in Colorado, efforts are starting with smaller steps that focus on a radius as small as a block or where vehicles can be left in the garage.

Organizations like LiveWell Colorado are working to increase awareness of the importance of having walk- and bike-friendly streets and neighborhoods. Campaigns like Viva Streets, where streets become car-free for a day, are increasing public activity and highlighting the benefits of car-independent lifestyles.

Parklets

Converting curbside parking into vibrant seating areas is the new thing.

These small spaces provide room for bike racks, greenery and a place to relax in a bustling city environment. They are products of partnerships between businesses, residents or local businesses and the city to help create a more social, walkable community.



SPOTLIGHT
COMMUNITY

Montrose

Tactical Urbanism in a Rural Colorado City

Main Street in Montrose wasn't very walkable.

A four-lane highway ran through town, parking in front of local shops was limited and stepping off the sidewalk posed a safety threat. The Downtown Development Authority (DDA) set out to add parklets – curbside seating created from former parking spots – and to downsize the highway that also served as Main Street from four lanes to two.

It was a textbook example of tactical urbanism. Reconstruction happened quickly, essentially overnight, and on a low budget. But first there was plenty of input, education of residents who worried about a loss of parking, and an ownership swap of the street from the state to the city.

On a \$9,000 budget, the development authority and the city transformed the area over a couple of days in September 2015.

Diagonal parking spaces were freed up when the lanes were halved, leading to better customer access to local businesses. Trees and parklets added aesthetic value. And overall safety was improved with new crosswalks and fewer traffic lanes. By coupling resident input with a small budget and a vision for the future, the Montrose project is helping to create a friendlier, safer and more walkable downtown.

Main Street: Before and After



Above: Before the project, Main Street was a busy four lane road. **Below:** After a night of renovations, a new fun and friendly atmosphere was created.