

Toward walkability - and happiness

By Dan Burden, guest commentary

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Over the 12 years I've spent advocating for walkable communities in about 2,500 towns and cities throughout the world - including 20 or so in the Bay Area - I've found a disparity in the level of happiness that appears to have nothing to do with levels of income.

In communities around San Jose, residents have an enviable standard of living in many respects, yet many don't seem as happy as one would expect in light of their income and the creative environment of Silicon Valley. What could be the cause? And more important, what are possible solutions?

A recent international study on happiness by researchers at Leicester University in England ranked the United States as only the 23rd happiest place in the world. Denmark is the happiest, according to the research.

It's probably no coincidence that more than 20 years ago, Denmark set a vision to become one of the best places to walk anywhere. It took a long time to get there, but the Danes apparently are very happy with their results.

Silicon Valley can follow this example. It can leverage its standard of living to increase its walkability and improve its quality of life.

One measure of quality of life is the level of access we have to the things we value most - jobs, safe streets, affordable transportation and housing, and quality health care, schools and civic spaces such as parks and other gathering places.

The ability to walk to many of these places from our homes or places of employment generally raises that quality-of-life index. When researchers look for places where people are happiest, it's often in communities where they can live near where they work, walk their children to school and shop at stores within walking or biking distance.

In Silicon Valley communities, most people don't live near where they work. In fact, many of the cutting-edge thinkers and innovators of the region have the worst commute times in the country.

Studies also indicate people are least happy when in their cars, largely because they cannot predict what will slow them down, or when. Thus the long commutes of Silicon Valley have gotten more and more costly, not only in terms of money and time, but also happiness.

Unfortunately, over the past several decades, we've designed our communities to move automobiles, not people. Too much is tied to the auto and is out of walking and bicycling range for residents. The happiest places in the world were designed to accommodate and support people, not their cars.

Take a walk and test this out. Walk a street or corridor and look for ways to make it a better place, where people can get to know more people and are within walking distance of the things they love or need.

For existing streets, ask community leaders to redesign the rights of way to support walking and biking - perhaps widening sidewalks and planting trees so that pedestrians feel protected from fast traffic.

For new development, encourage projects that are compact and walkable, with homes near stores and jobs, and streets that are comfortable to walk and bike. Connect streets so it's easy to get from one place to another without going out onto a multiple-lane road with fast traffic.

My work involves walking with people to discover what often turn out to be incredible opportunities and successes. To walk and talk through what changes are needed on a street, in a corridor, or in a downtown, and then see those towns convert to better places to live is both gratifying and encouraging. So, too, is seeing the happiness created in these places.

Silicon Valley's residents have a real opportunity to rethink what makes them most happy. Whether driven by gas prices, long commutes or the need to be more connected to our communities, we can redesign and improve our neighborhoods to get back on our feet.

And that, to me, is a happy thought.

Livable communities talk

DAN BURDEN will speak on "Great Ideas for Building Livable Communities" at Monday's installment of San Jose's Great Cities Speakers Series at 6 p.m. at the San Jose Repertory Theatre. He'll be joined by Andy Ball, an avid cyclist and president and chief executive of Webcor Builders, the largest general contractor in California. Admission is free, but it's a good idea to reserve tickets at info@1stACT.org.

DAN BURDEN is the founder of Walkable Communities Inc. and is a principal with community-planning firm Gladding Jackson Kercher Anglin.