

# Walk This Way

A civic activist explains how you can make your community a healthier, more valuable place to live

Americans collectively spend more time gridlocked in traffic than ever before—4.2 billion hours annually, according to a recent study by Texas A&M University. When you consider how much time we spend in our cars, it's not very surprising to learn that the cities with the worst traffic congestion—Los Angeles, Houston, Detroit, and Atlanta—also have high health-care costs. People who live in pedestrian- and bike-friendly communities, on the other hand, have

lower rates of obesity and depression, smaller carbon footprints, and higher property values. The correlation is clear: The more time you spend in a car, the more your quality of life deteriorates. And according to another recent study, this one from the University of South Florida, vehicle miles of traffic increased as much as three times the rate of population growth in the past eight years.

As the founder of Walkable Communities, a nonprofit organization, I've helped citizens in 2,500 cities around the world make their

communities more conducive to walking. For the first 35 years of my life, I lived in Columbus, Ohio, and Missoula, Montana, two cities that urban planners praise for having "good block form," or a mix of residential housing, locally owned stores, and public parks linked by sidewalks and mass transit. Both locations helped me learn that cars have a place in our cities, but proper urban planning allows people to walk rather than forces them to drive.

A great example of a city that came to this realization is University Place in Washington State. Being only 30 miles south of Seattle, the town of 27,700 faced serious growth issues in the 1990s. Developers wanted to build big-box stores, lay more roads, and widen streets—typical American sprawl. But locals weren't so sure about that vision and invited me for a visit. I spent a day walking and photographing the streets, and while the city's views of Puget Sound amazed me,

its streets proved extremely frustrating to navigate on foot. Creating an environment for people to walk and ride their bicycles, I told the residents of University Place, is as much about controlling traffic as it is about creating sidewalks and bike lanes. The key would be slowing traffic to 30 miles an hour; any faster and pedestrians no longer feel safe enough to walk near roads. I showed them how to redesign many of their streets to encourage foot traffic, and they took my advice. Within five years, the city has transformed itself into the hottest real-estate market in the region. The city recently began construction of a \$250 million retail and government district called Town Center, and the area's premier golf course opened in the summer of 2007. As you'd expect, both are a short walk from downtown.

Here are the simple things any community can do to improve its quality of living. AS TOLD TO WILL RIZZO



## Widen the Sidewalks

"Building a sidewalk isn't enough to inspire people to use it. In commercial areas, they should be 10 feet wide with another few feet of landscaping to buffer pedestrians from the roadway and make them feel safely separated from traffic."

## Protect Bicyclists

"Like pedestrians, cyclists feel safer around traffic when they have their own space on the roadway. Five-foot-wide bike lanes tell drivers that cyclists have a legitimate place on the road, while adding a visual cue for motorists to slow down."

## Reduce the Number of Lanes

"Sometimes cities can't widen the roadways to accommodate improvements such as medians and bike lanes. In that case, I recommend what I call 'the road diet.' Say there are two lanes of traffic in each direction. I propose slimming the roadway to

three lanes: one in each direction, with a turn lane in the center. The extra space from the fourth lane can then be converted into pathways for pedestrians and cyclists."

## Go Narrow

"When drivers are confined by narrower lanes, traffic slows down and motorists become more alert. Every foot removed from a lane causes drivers to reduce their speed. Most states require 11- to 12-foot-wide lanes, but Robert Noland, of

London's Imperial College, analyzed 15 years' worth of U.S. data and found that 9- to 10-foot-wide lanes may lead to fewer accidents. The secret is building lanes wide enough for all users but maintaining them at a narrower width."

## Separate Traffic With Medians

"Medians invite foot traffic. Pedestrians have to cross only one or two lanes before reaching security, which is much more appealing than having to run across five lanes of two-way traffic."

## Replace Traffic Signals With Roundabouts

"Drivers in cities that have roundabouts get home quicker, even though they're traveling at a slower speed. Roundabouts may force drivers to proceed at 15 to 20 miles an hour as they approach their turns, but roundabouts move 30 percent

more vehicles than traffic signals do. This is because if a driver tries to beat a traffic signal and turns across an intersection, other drivers are forced to wait. Roundabouts are also much safer than intersections."

Their circular shape makes all the drivers travel in the same direction, and this reduces serious crashes, such as head-on collisions, by about 90 percent."

## Paint Fog Lines

"Visual tricks can make lanes seem narrower. Most fog lines, the shoulder's painted boundary, are four inches wide. On University Place's busiest streets, we made them eight inches. Drivers feel more enclosed by the bolder lines and travel slower."

## Plant Trees

"When trees line streets, they create a sense of security and separation from the roadway that attracts pedestrians and gives drivers a reference point for their speed. Urban trees also increase property values by up to 20 percent. Buy and maintain

three trees for \$1,000 in front of a \$400,000 home, and eventually they'll return \$60,000 in added value. Trees save money too. By reducing the air temperature, trees can yield huge energy savings for nearby homes and businesses.

And according to Forest Service research, urban trees can be about 10 times as effective as forest trees for lowering carbon dioxide in cities. Sycamores are especially efficient at gobbling polluted air."



Dan Burden, 65, is the founder of the nonprofit Walkable Communities Inc. (walkable.org). He is also a principal of Glattig, Jackson, Kercher, Anglin Inc. (glattig.com).