

# Commonwealth Communities: Make Way for Walkability

Virtual Symposium: October 6, 2021

## Speaker highlights: what is walkability?



**Stacey Beutell,**  
Executive Director,  
WalkBoston

“Walkability is the ability to walk outside my door, and to feel safe, both personally and from vehicular traffic. I want to have somewhere to go and people to connect with.”



**The Hon. Robbyn Lewis,**  
Delegate,  
District 46,  
Maryland  
House of  
Delegates

“Walkability is a human right. It provides freedom in that there is a sense of physical safety when moving around in public space. Walkability is at the heart of equity and public policy, and elected officials have a duty to protect and expand walkability.”



**Mr. Jeff Speck,**  
Principal,  
Speck &  
Associates

“Walkability in a particular place means that having an automobile is an investment of freedom, not something we are dependent on. We should be able to live with fewer cars, and living life without one should be possible for everyone.”

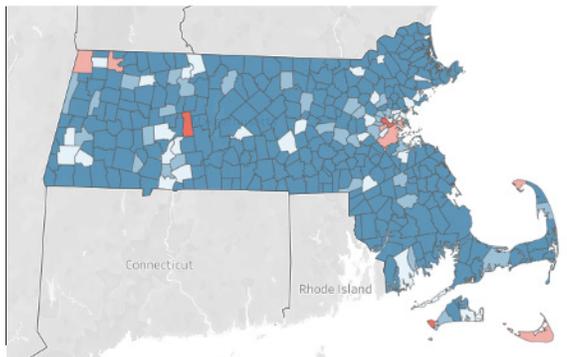


**The Hon. John Robert Smith,**  
Senior  
Policy Advisor,  
Smart Growth  
America

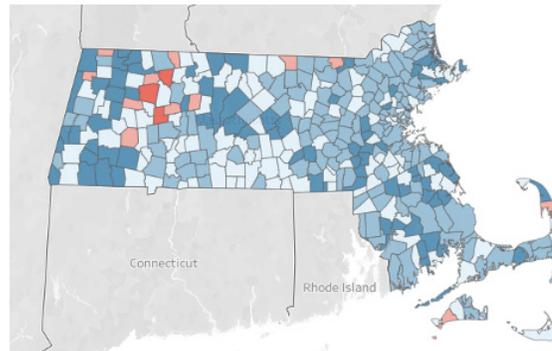
“Walkability means that, no matter who you are, you can easily access the daily needs of life without reliance on a personal vehicle. Walkability is a fantastic economic strategy that allows urban centers to be developed equally.”

## Background

COVID-19 has dramatically altered our sense of community and place. Massachusetts communities faced unprecedented hardships, but met them with resilience, innovation, sacrifice, and strength. During the Fall and Winter of 2021, LOCUS, Smart Growth America's program to promote responsible real estate development and investment, hosted Commonwealth Communities: Smart Growth Strategies for Our Emergent Future. This series of five virtual symposia provided Massachusetts' elected officials and local government staff a platform to hear from experts across the country and discuss strategies for enhancing placemaking and equity in the Commonwealth to bring health, prosperity, and resilience to their communities over the long term. This five-part technical assistance series, summarized in these five discussion guides, addressed walkability, transit-oriented development, small businesses development, and zoning reform. The symposium series resulted in engaging conversation, opportunities for partnerships, and the development of new ideas in the realm of smart growth and sustainability.



Change from January 2019 to January 2020 (pre-pandemic)



Change from April 2019 to April 2020 (during the pandemic)

**% Change, YOY**  
 ■ Less than -50%  
 ■ -50% to -25%  
 ■ -25% to 25%  
 ■ 25% to 50%  
 ■ Greater than 50%  
 Source: MassDOT

Even without significant changes in policy or infrastructure, pedestrian activity across the Commonwealth increased significantly during the pandemic. Below are two maps of the state showing the percentage change in pedestrian activity, by jurisdiction, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Measured through walk audits, this data shows that walking dramatically increased during the early months of the pandemic.

During this session, speakers identified three main themes that public officials should consider when designing walkable urban and suburban areas: walkability and safety; public investment; and walkability and economic development.

## What are the benefits of walkability?

### Health Benefits

- Affordable, accessible physical exercise
- Reduced risk of disease
- Increased social interaction and mental health benefits
- Enhanced community identity

### Economic Benefits

- Economic development benefits to small and local businesses
- Increased housing diversity as a result of increased density and mix of uses
- Increased land values producing boosted tax revenue for local government
- Better access to employment and daily needs

### Equity Benefits

- Lower transportation costs provide better access to jobs, retail and recreation for low- and moderate-income residents
- More active streets provide opportunities to host community and social events open to all
- More eyes on the street and slower traffic increases street safety
- Increased opportunity for community building and daily interactions among with neighbors

### Environmental Benefits

- Reduced vehicle miles traveled leads to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions
- More compact, walkable development can preserve open space and reduce air and water pollution

# Theme 1: walkability and safety

**Safety and walkability are interdependent.** Places must be safe for people to walk and urban design intended to increase walkability will increase safety for all. Both the perception and reality of road safety influences how and where people walk. Traffic volume, speed, and pedestrian infrastructure all influence how safe pedestrians feel when walking.

According to studies conducted by WalkBoston, Black pedestrians in Massachusetts are more than twice as likely to be hospitalized for their injuries compared to white pedestrians, and are more than four times as likely to visit the emergency room, compared to white pedestrians. Communities of color, which have been historically marginalized by structural racism in land use, development and lending policy, have also been subject to divisive highways, destroying communities and worsening air quality. In addition, the absence of walkability infrastructure and lack of investment in traffic-calming measures in low-income communities continues to leave the most vulnerable populations most at-risk of being injured or killed by a vehicle. Public officials need to access and track data on injuries to inform investment and ensure that all community members have the fundamental right of being able to walk and get to their destinations safely.

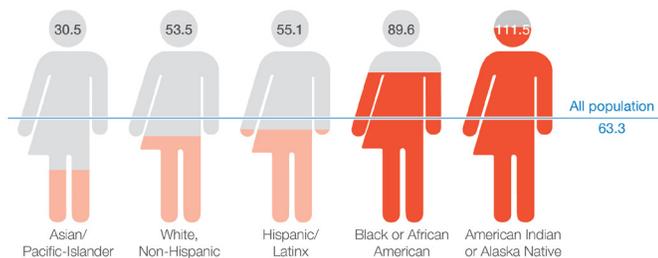


**Policymakers and designers must think about the “safe walk”—both actual and perceived—and the most efficient and effective ways to get cars to slow down. Some effective strategies might include:**

- Reducing block size and multi-lane, one-way streets
- Reducing lane width as people tend to drive faster in wider lanes
- Investing in bicycling and bus lanes, and providing extra lane space for bikes
- Creating enticing streetscapes, through standards for building design including strategies to mask unattractive elements that lack “eyes on the street” for safety, such as parking garages and blank walls

## The burden is not shared equally

Relative pedestrian danger by race and ethnicity (2010-2019)



Source: Smart Growth America, *Dangerous by Design*:

According to Smart Growth America’s *Dangerous by Design* report, between 2010 and 2019, drivers struck and killed 53,435 people while walking in the U.S., more than 14 people per day on average. In the past three years, drivers struck and killed more people walking than in three decades.

By prioritizing street design to favor cars over people, the risk of death or injury for pedestrians has dramatically increased. The current approach to addressing these deaths has been a focus on enforcement, educational campaigns, or blaming the victims of these crashes. Policymakers and local leaders have the ability to make streets safer for everyone by redesigning roads, prioritizing green space, and providing infrastructure to support walkability for people of all ages, races and abilities.

## Theme 2: public investment favors cars over people

**Investment by the public sector continues to prioritize cars over people.** Government agencies at all levels--federal, state, and local--continue to spend billions to make our roads faster, wider, and, as a result, less safe for pedestrians. If just a portion of these funds were redirected to sidewalks, safe crossings, and traffic calming strategies, our thoroughfares would be safer for and more appealing to pedestrians and the benefits outlined above would accrue to more communities.

State governments continue to design roads for high speeds, rather than safety of pedestrians and route highways through established neighborhoods. The federal government has failed to pass comprehensive policies that prioritize safety, like the Complete Streets Act of 2021. It will require a change of emphasis and investments by state and federal departments of transportation if streets are to be safer and more accessible for everyone.

**Design for safety over speed—**"Access to safe, convenient transportation is a fundamental right. Today, most Americans are denied this right because their roads—not just highways—are designed to move vehicles at the highest speeds possible, and roads are not designed for people walking, biking, or taking transit as a priority. High speeds make sense on interstates and other highways, but fatalities occur when we design all streets for high speeds rather than to connect people and create value. Local and arterial roads must be designed to put safety first." — [T4A Principles](#)

## Theme 3: designing for walkability and economic growth

**Ensuring that streets are walkable and safe has positive, long-term economic impacts on communities.**

Safe streets create an attractive environment for businesses, and studies have shown that an increased number of pedestrians leads to increased activity and spending at local businesses.

In its recent report, *Zoned In: Economic Benefits and Shared Prosperity with Form-Based Codes*, the Form-Based Codes Institute at Smart Growth America makes the case that **places with form-based zoning, which are designed to be more walkable, produce more economic benefits for property owners and localities, without, necessarily, causing displacement.** In this study, FBCI looked at four jurisdictions around the country to compare places with conventional zoning to places that had had form-based zoning in the same jurisdiction. Not only were the areas regulated by form-based zoning more walkable, they also saw more construction activity, the resident population grew faster, and they generated significantly more tax revenue. Average rents also grew at a slower pace, which is likely on account of the more diverse housing stock delivered through a form-based code.

# Questions for every municipal official to think about:

## 1. What can we do to make places more walkable?

Smart tactics for creating walkable places include:

- Require or encourage wide sidewalks; front stoops; street trees and greenery; attractive and accessible public spaces; crosswalks at key intersections.
- Support private development of vibrant, local destinations that provide appealing goods and services and offer walkable spaces that are safe, comfortable and interesting.
- Make connections between destinations that are safe, comfortable, and active.

## 2. How can local leaders build coalitions to enhance walkability?

**Building a coalition of supporters can support policy change to lead to walkability and increased investment in safe streets and public spaces.**

Some effective advocacy strategies include:

- Ensuring door-to-door connection to reach residents;
- Engaging groups and organizations whose constituents benefit from more walkable places and better connectivity;
- Finding allies in local, state, and federal government to build regional coalitions;
- Investing in programs like [Complete Streets](#) and the [Liveable Streets Coalition](#)



Source: The Honorable Robyn Lewis, Maryland House of Delegates

**Case Study:** Massachusetts Department of Transportation, [Shared Spaces and Streets Program](#), which helps local communities with resources to improve main streets, sidewalk space, outdoor dining, and shared mobility.



Source: Stacey Beutell, WalkBoston

Melrose, MA



Source: Stacey Beutell, WalkBoston

Everett, MA

# Additional Resources:

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- Our COVID-19 Response: Streets for Recovery. *The Lawrence & Lillian Solomon Foundation*. <https://www.solomonfoundation.org/streetsforrecovery/>
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- Transportation for America. *Smart Growth America*. <https://t4america.org/>

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