

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Guest on The Infra Blog: Scott Bricker, Director, America Walks

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Why Compact Communities Are Strong

Walking really is a fundamental human behavior, and it's one of the things that does define us as humans, but it really is the most basic and fundamental form of mobility and transportation. It's effectively free and accessible to everyone. Even those with disabilities would be considered pedestrians under the law, and so providing safe and accommodating walking routes for people effectively ensures that everyone has equal access to services and employment, education, recreation, where people play and pray, et cetera. It's a fundamental aspect of equal mobility access. There's also a fair amount of research that shows that communities that are walkable, that have places that are close to each other, are economically vibrant. So on one hand it's free; on the other hand the communities in walkable areas are economically competitive. People spend more of their money in their local communities and not exporting those dollars, particularly at the pump. And it improves real-estate values. There's a basic safety issue here as well for the 30% of the population that doesn't have a driver's license or can't drive, or for everyone else who's seeking transportation options, safe accessible walking conditions provide them with a daily opportunity to get out there and walk and meet their daily needs.

Making Cities Walkable Again

Historically, cities were planned for walking, and the infrastructure was such that people would be able to walk. If you look at the cities across America, they are founded on walkable infrastructure, and even in small towns it's the idea of a "Main Street." So there has been a significant, 50-year-plus period of suburban sprawl where the focus was away from people and towards the automobile from a mobility standpoint. That separation between where people live, where people work and where people choose to go for their other needs and recreation, effectively eliminates the ability for people to walk for transportation reasons, and so the infrastructure is critical. But in addition to the land-use side, there really is a transportation-infrastructure side. The speed of automobiles is one of the top issues that we're concerned about and people who walk for daily purposes are concerned about. You can have things that are very close to each other but if you have to cross a 50-mile-an-hour, five-lane arterial to get from the bus stop to your destination, you're literally taking your life in your hands to cross the street to do that. So in addition to the land use, there are also the details of the transportation infrastructure that deal with things like speed, deal with things like distance of crossing the street, and then other things as well that might decrease distractions—where behavior of the people who are driving can have a huge impact on the real and perceived safety for people to be able to access services on foot.

Now More Than Ever, People Want Walkability

Our vision is that people across America would embrace walking and walkability, and with that would follow the infrastructure improvements and retrofits to ensure that is created. And this is for people of all ages, abilities, ethnicities, incomes, to be able to walk for all different types of reasons, for transportation as well as exercise and recreation. We actually think that this is in part doable. There is a huge percentage of people who would prefer to live close to a service, like even a coffee shop or some type of service, and would be willing to actually trade house size for accessibility via foot. There is some research done, for example by the National Association of Realtors, that says that 50% of the population would be willing to live in a smaller house if they could access services on foot. We've also seen polls, for example AARP, that the people 50-plus are really desiring to stay where they are, to age in place, and that pedestrian safety is a critical aspect of that as people either leave their ability to drive or are looking to have a shift in their lifestyle as their lifestyle changes. The same is true with the millennial generation. In fact there are a lot of similarities between the 50-plus and the millennials who are really seeking out cities and towns where they don't need to own a car, where they can funnel their limited financial resources in other places. So we're really seeing the convergence of that piece specifically, and in addition many cities and elected officials and leaders are recognizing this and are reacting; one of the main groups that have started to react are businesses, because they have realized that in order to attract the talent that they need and want, they need to start repositioning themselves and locating in downtown campuses. Google is providing buses out to their campus because they know that people don't want to drive and get stuck in traffic as part of their lifestyle. This is a big trend that we're seeing, and we think that this vision is achievable.

The Purpose of Cities: Bringing People Together

I think that the founding of towns and cities, historically, was based around people wanting to come together to share resources and specialization of skills and effectively being able to be more successful and to flourish as well as having the social interaction of cities and of people. We've learned an ability to deal with basic things like sanitation and sewer and water, but the fundamental aspect of it was always the ability to walk and be within proximate distances of other people. And we really are seeing that need still today, even though there was a period of time—a substantial 50-year period of time—where there was a belief that with the advent of the automobile we didn't need to live close to each other anymore. We could live 40 or 50 miles away from our work or our peers. And that really is being questioned, and we know that our cities are still vibrant because people want to and need to be near each other in order to innovate, in order to collaborate. So while technology allows us to have this interview across the country, and you can have peers and colleagues across the country and across the world, people are still efficient and effective and still desire the face-to-face proximity of each other. So we need to design strategies to make sure that happens. Some of those are land-use strategies and some of those are transportation strategies and the intersection between those two. I think the issue here is whether this is a national issue or a state and local issue, and I would argue that it is all of the above. Even though a sidewalk at a local level feels like a very local issue, if the foundation of our corporate climate and of our

community culture or climate is based upon the need of that being successful, that should be taken up at the highest levels, at the national level as well as at the local levels.

America Walks: Making the World a More Walkable Place

America Walks is a national nonprofit organization that works to make America a great place to walk, and we do that in three different areas. Our base component is supporting local advocates with technical assistance and campaign strategy development to make their communities more walkable and increase walking. We also have a national partnership called the Everybody Walk Collaborative with over 100 national and local organizations that are collaborating. A lot of it is around communications, getting the word out to the constituencies of the 100-plus organizations about the importance of walking and walkability. And then we do advocacy at the national level to advance policies and funding for walking and walkability.

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