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Where the Sidewalk Ends: The Walkability of Allamakee County

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Abstract

To help with the desire of Allamakee County, Iowa to evaluate the county's walkability, the current study set out to evaluate the walkability of three towns within the county. Pictures were taken as a form of photographic data and towns were given subjective ratings by the members of this study based on 12 points of walkability. Based on this data, areas were discovered where work could be done in order to increase walkability and suggestions were given to remedy these hindrances to walkability.

Where the Sidewalk Ends: The Walkability of Allamakee County

Walkability, in general, can be defined as how able one is to walk around an area and the ease by which the area lends itself to walking. Many studies today look at walkability in and amongst various populations (Haines et al., 2007; Saelens, Sallis, Black, & Chen, 2003). One reason more studies are currently investigating this issue is because increasing walkability also can increase the sense of community (The Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center, n.d.) and lead to complete, healthy, and happy lives for those who live them (Walkable Communities, Inc., n.d.). This leads to the question of “What makes a community walkable?” Walkability expert, Dan Burden, came up with 12 points by which the walkability of a community can be evaluated (Burden, n.d.).

Evaluating a Walkable Community

Dan Burden’s 12 points of walkable communities are:

1. Intact Town Centers:

Intact town centers are centers of the town that are useful to the citizens in their everyday life. An ideal intact town center would have things like grocery stores, barbers/beauticians, pharmacies, and restaurants all within about ¼ of a mile (or approximately 5 minutes), to encourage citizens to walk to do their shopping instead of being required to drive from store to store.

2. Residential Densities, Mixed Income, and Mixed Use:

This point encourages that the town centers are “true neighborhoods”. A “true neighborhood” has the highest densities of the population near the town center, and therefore within walking distance of the town center, and does not discriminate based on income. The line between the town proper and adjacent neighborhoods is not distinct.

3. Public Space:

Public space seeks to have adequate areas where people can assemble in a large outdoor environment. These areas should be no further than 1/8 of a mile away from all homes.

4. Universal Design:

Universal designs seek to set up the community in a way that makes it accessible and safe to all members of the community, including those with special needs. Examples of this include having adequate ramps, benches, and shade.

5. Key Streets are Speed Control:

This point seeks to keep streets safe by keeping speeds lower in areas that are designed to be walkable. This keeps people safer and lowers the number of vehicular accident related injuries and deaths.

6. Streets/Trails are Well Linked:

The ideal community has a block/grid design or some other highly connected pattern. Getting from point A to point B should be relatively easy to do without having to leave the path or go too far out of one's way. Cul-de-sac patterns are highly discouraged.

7. Design is Properly Scaled:

Things frequently traveled to, such as schools and most services, should be within a radius of no more than 1/2 of a mile.

8. Town is Designed for People:

A town designed for people will have many/large plazas, parks, and walkways connecting to various destinations of interest. This makes the area friendlier to pedestrians as opposed to motorists.

9. Town is Thinking Small:

The downtown area is set up in a way that discourages motorists from driving into town. Things that accomplish this include limited/no free parking, few parking places, and no/few parking lots.

10. Many People are Walking:

This one is pretty much self-explanatory. In walkable communities, one would expect to see a lot of people walking and less people driving. If the community appears to be walkable, but no one is walking, other contributing factors, such as crime, should be addressed.

11. The Towns and Neighborhoods have a Vision:

Plans exist for increasing and maintaining walkability. The focus is not on where to get the money from, but how to use the available funds to their fullest potential.

12. Decision Makers are Visionary, Communicative and Forward Thinking:

The walkable community has people who are leaders. They can see where the walkability started at and see a goal for the future walkability and are motivated to achieve it. They use what they have to accomplish these goals without getting too hung up on the obstacles that get in their way.

Objective

Based on the Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative meetings, it was determined that the citizens of Allamakee County desire to have a barrier mapping/walkability evaluation of the towns in the county. This project sought to provide a preliminary assessment of the barriers and walkability of three towns of varying size in the county. The towns investigated were Waterville, Postville, and

Waukon and their sizes were small, medium, and large, respectively, in comparison to one another. The goal of this study was to use the 12 points of walkable communities to assess and make recommendations in order to increase walkability in Allamakee County.

Method

Procedure

Over the course of the Fall Semester of 2007, the research group traveled to three towns within Allamakee County of varying size and evaluated their walkability. The first community visited, Waukon, was the largest of the three, the second one visited, Waterville, was the smallest, and the last visited, Postville, was in-between the other two towns in terms of size. An approximate town center was chosen from each town as the starting point for evaluation. Then surveying groups proceeded to evaluate the blocks in the general vicinity of the town center.

Materials

Many sources were found that gave their opinions on what makes a community walkable (e.g. Fitness Council of Jackson, n.d.), however, Dan Burden's 12 points of walkability was chosen for its clear and concise descriptions of a walkable community.

Evaluations consisted of the collection of photographic evidence of characteristics enhancing or hindering walkability. Subjective ratings from the survey group members were gathered for each of the 12 Points of a walkable community. Possible ratings were "Yes", "Yes/No", and "No". A rating of "Yes" said that the raters felt the point was well established/present in the town evaluated. A rating of "Yes/No" said that the raters felt the point was established/present to some degree in the town, but not near its fullest

potential. A rating of “No” said that the raters felt the point was not very well established/present in the town.

Results

The photographic data can be seen in the Appendix with a brief summary on what it shows. The “Yes, Yes/No, No” scores were converted into scores. A “Yes” was given a score of 2, a “Yes/No” was given a score of 1, and a “No” was given a score of 0. The three towns’ scores for each of the 12 points were totaled. Higher scores indicated that the county, as a whole, demonstrated high walkability on this point. Lower scores denoted that the county, as a whole, showed low walkability on this point. A breakdown of this data is found in Table 1.

Discussion

After the data was collected and ratings were transformed into scores, lower numbers indicated areas where Allamakee County could work to improve walkability. The data show five points that the county could greatly improve upon; the greatest of which being the Town is Thinking Small. At first glance, this seems a little surprising, as the towns are relatively small compared to even suburbs of major cities. However, keeping in mind this point’s definition, these towns do not have the “intimate” setting this point requires. Cars tend to drive by at speeds slightly above the speed limit, more than adequate parking is provided everywhere, and walking is presented in a way that makes it appear secondary to driving. A suggestion made by walkinginfo.org that could apply here is providing incentives to walk, such as walk to work programs that provide insurance benefits based on participation (The Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center

n.d.). Other things the authors of this study came up with include increased police presence in order to better enforce the speed limits.

The next worst point of the 12 was point #4, Universal Design. Most of the pathways designed to be walkable are only walkable for the average healthy person. Elderly individuals and individuals with physical handicaps might have problems navigating these walkways because some have sections of great disrepair as well as non-existent ramps to and from the crosswalk. By not conforming to the needs of all, individuals with handicaps as well as their families may not be as likely to walk. This was one of the areas our group felt the W.K. Kellogg Foundation money could be used, as this point requires money to fix, whereas the previous point discussed does not necessarily require any money. By making the sidewalks and pathways more walkable for all, the opportunity exists for an increase in walkability.

Other noteworthy points of potential improvement include #5, #7, #8, and #11. These points fit in with the two other points discussed in that they look to reduce the usage of motor vehicles as well as to promote walking by making places to walk to more easily accessible.

Not everything was negative. It should be noted that many of the points scored a 4 or higher, indicating that at least one of the towns was doing a good job on that point. The most notable positive point was #2, Residential Densities, Mixed Income, and Mixed Use, which scored a perfect 6, indicating that all three of the communities are doing well at fulfilling this walkability point.

In a general sense, Allamakee County could stand to improve on a few points of walkability; however, not everything is unfavorable. Based on the evaluations provided,

it is our group's recommendation that Allamakee County focus on improving their towns to think small and make the town design more universal. We further recommend that money from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation be used to fix the worst of the sidewalks and put ramps from the sidewalk to every crosswalk. In this way, walking will be more pleasant for all and walkability within Allamakee County should increase.

References

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Appendix

