
Somerville named 10th-most walkable city in the nation

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Somerville last month was named the 10th-most walkable city in the country, following on the heels of successful initiatives by the City of Somerville to make the area more pedestrian-friendly.

Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone has over the past several years spearheaded large-scale projects designed to make Somerville more walkable with the aim of improving the health, safety and economy of the city.

"The city has been working to improve walkability for eight years," Somerville's Director of Parks and Open Space Arn Franzen told the Daily. "When the Mayor came in, it was one of his main agendas."

The initiatives were recognized by Walkscore.com, a website that ranks cities based on how easy it is for its residents to travel without the use of a car. The website ranked Somerville the 10th-most walkable city with a population over 10,000 and fifth for cities with populations greater than 70,000.

The website bases the ranking of a city on the Walk Score it assigns each individual resident. Rankings range from 0 — meaning a resident is car-dependent and requires a car for almost all errands — to 100, indicating that a resident does not require a car for any daily errands.

One-hundred percent of Somerville's residents received a Walk Score of at least 70, which means that most errands can be done by foot.



Gabriela Ros / Tufts Daily

The City of Somerville's initiatives to improve pedestrian safety and accessibility resulted in the area being named the 10th-most walkable city in the nation last month.

Regional Active Transit Director Nicole Rioles noted that the city's new initiatives involved efforts to increase the city's accessibility for all people, including those with disabilities, and to ensure the safety of pedestrians.

"Design considerations have been put in place, especially with intersections and road designs," she told the Daily. "Crosswalks have been made more visible so that they are safer for kids walking to school."

Rioles said that the mayor partnered with the City of Somerville's Departments of Planning and Building, Police, School, Traffic and Parking to discuss an optimal plan of action to make the city more accessible and safe.

Assistant Professor of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning Justin Hollander noted that Somerville's "walkability" makes it a more environmentally-friendly community.

"The more walkable a city is, the less people need to depend on driving cars and other modes of transit. It's the most sustainable method of transport and creates no green house emissions," Hollander said. "Walkability promotes free and sustainable modes of transport."

During his tenure, then-University President Lawrence Bacow was involved in the city initiatives designed to make Somerville more accessible for families and Tufts students, Hollander said.

"Larry Bacow was an urban planner himself and Tufts should get a lot of credit, as well the students pushing for this agenda," Hollander said.

Increasing a city's walkability has other fringe benefits, Rioles added, like fostering a more active and closer-knit community.

"Walkability makes people healthier, more physically active, and air quality improves," she said. "There is less driving, and the culture of the city is great. You see people smiling, engaging each other on the street; it's a much more social place on the sidewalk since people are out and about."

Hollander added that the increased sense of community created by a more pedestrian-friendly environment can break down racial, ethnic and other stereotypes.

"Chance encounters with people on the street breaks down stereotypes, and people become less prejudiced because they encounter people who are different than they are more often," he explained.

The economy of Somerville can also be positively affected by the city's new initiatives, according to Hollander.

"It helps to create centers within the city like commercial centers, such as Davis Square and Union Square," Hollander said. "People are more likely to walk into shops and business, so it keeps the business at home."

Somerville should serve as a good model for urban planning practices, according to Joseph Cutrufo (GA '10), program coordinator for WalkBoston, a nonprofit organization devoted to improving walking conditions in cities throughout Massachusetts.

"There are nearly two dozen planning initiatives going on in Somerville right now, from the Green Line extension to the Community Path to the grounding of McGrath Highway and streetscape improvements on Broadway in East Somerville," Cutrufo told the Daily in an email.

Hollander hopes that the trend of making cities more walkable continues nationwide, and that Somerville will serve as an example in urban planning curricula.

"Somerville hasn't come into the curriculum just yet but as it gets this recognition, soon we will be turning to case studies in Somerville," Hollander said.