
Communities look to paths and plazas to encourage walking

2 messages

Linda Jonash <LJonash@rosekennedygreenway.org>

Thu, Apr 14, 2011 at 9:06 AM

To: "Wendy Landman (wlandman@walkboston.org)" <wlandman@walkboston.org>, "Ann Hershfang (hershfan@theworld.com)" <hershfan@theworld.com>

Nice article, keep up the good work guys.

Linda Jonash

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http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2011/04/14/communities_look_to_paths_and_plazas_to_encourage_walking/



Steve Zimmerman and his wife, Larissa Doronina, walk along the pedestrian mall on Essex Street in Salem with 21-month-old Alex. (Lisa Poole for The Boston Globe)

Communities look to paths and plazas to encourage walking

As the days get longer and the sun gets warmer, residents north of Boston are lacing up their sneakers and looking for safe, pleasant places to walk.

Increasingly, they're finding opportunities close to home as cities and towns vie to become more pedestrian-friendly. But making communities more walkable, it turns out, might have more to do with creativity than following a fixed formula.

Long-term visions are becoming realities this year. In Gloucester, walkers will soon find it easier to explore the harbor's edge as the city puts up HarborWalk signs and other features with help from a \$500,000 Seaport Advisory Council grant. From Danvers Center, pedestrians can now walk about 7 miles on an almost finished path to Topsfield, thanks to new bridge decking installed last November over the Ipswich River. Final touches on the trail are expected later this year.

"People are starting to use the [Danvers-to-Topsfield] trail now to walk their dogs and walk to school," said David Read, chairman of the Border to Boston Trail Coalition, which is working to connect trails from New Hampshire to the Massachusetts capital. "It's going to significantly enhance walking in our communities."

Other projects, still in discussion stages, aim to encourage more walking by rethinking vehicular transportation. In Medford, residents lobbying for a Green Line subway station say it would encourage thousands to walk daily since there is no parking facility in the proposal. Hence they've been pushing for more crosswalks, longer crossing times at traffic signals, and a Minuteman Bikeway extension project (under construction) that will bring the trail to Medford.

Salem, meanwhile, is exploring whether to open the Essex Street pedestrian mall to through traffic at certain times of the day or year when foot traffic is minimal. A redesigned mall would allow for better management of delivery vehicles, which now compete for space with walkers, according to Lynn Duncan, Salem's director of planning and community development. What's more, she said, the city would have the option to permit car traffic in winter — and, ideally, increase pedestrian activity in the process.

"At 10 o'clock at night, especially in the winter, there's nobody walking on that mall," Duncan said. "So the question is. . . are there some times when that space could be shared to a greater degree?"

Public forums to discuss Salem's mall redesign project have shown how pedestrian issues evoke strong feelings. Some fear the introduction of cars will mar a pedestrian sanctuary. Others hope changes might encourage more walking and, in turn, spark more retail business downtown.

Since every community is unique, there is no silver bullet method for becoming more "walkable," according to Mark Fenton, a Scituate-based planning and transportation consultant to municipalities on how to become more walkable. Pedestrian malls can work well year-round if enough people live and shop in close proximity, he said. [Continued...](#)

Page 2 of 2 --

But sometimes a pedestrian mall can't generate enough foot traffic to support its merchants. When that situation unfolded recently in Helena, Mont., Fenton said, the community took steps to reintroduce slow car traffic.

"If the business district is thriving, I'd be hard-pressed to say that bringing car traffic back is going to help in any way," Fenton said.

"The really interesting question they should be asking is . . . how do we reintroduce people to this street? If it turns out that cars are the only way, then perhaps seasonally opening the corridor, or doing so at certain times of day, might be a good idea. But you'd have to prove to me that that's going to bring bodies there."

Making cities more walkable is a mission with a long history in this area. In the early 1900s, the Commonwealth

of Massachusetts acquired private land in Lynn and relocated homes by barge to Nahant. The result is today's popular walkway connecting Nahant to Swampscott along Lynn Shore Drive.

Communities continue to build on their pasts in ways that encourage walking. Six years ago, the city of Lawrence worked with the state and other partners to extend Pemberton Park, where walkways and a boardwalk now allow more pedestrian access to the Merrimack River's urban banks. Over the past two years, Newburyport and Salisbury have opened trails on former rail beds.

As communities explore ways to enhance walkability, officials say they're getting broad support. Public health officers love the trend, since walking can help reduce obesity rates and other health issues, says Read, whose background is in public health. In Gloucester, Mayor Carolyn Kirk says parents have been pleased to see the city paving sidewalks when streets are paved near schools. Repaired sidewalks, she said, help give parents confidence that it's safe for kids to walk to school.

Businesses also welcome pedestrian-friendly improvements since they attract residents and tourists alike, according to the Cape Ann Chamber of Commerce's executive director, Bob Hastings. Still, he added, improvements need to live up to their billing and not detract from a community's existing assets.

"What would have once been considered a gritty working waterfront — that's the appeal," Hastings said. "Visitors are looking for authenticity, and Gloucester has an authentic working waterfront . . . It's a very interesting landscape to view."

As communities consider how best to encourage walking, they're finding that not all walkers have the same needs. Salem's Essex Street pedestrian mall was a big lifestyle draw for Steve Zimmerman, who relocated from Milton to Salem last year with his wife and baby. They rent downtown, where they cherish being able to shop, bump into friends, and push a stroller any time of day or night without worrying about cars.

"We decided that this is where we want to stay," Zimmerman said, noting that his Russian-born wife likes the European feel of a pedestrian-oriented Essex Street. "If they opened it up to traffic, then I don't know how things would change, or if we'd be as inclined to just open up the door and let [our son] run around, or just walk around and soak things in like we do now."

Anna Tierney-Boland of Swampscott also loves to walk in Salem. A loan manager at Salem Five, she habitually strolls the pedestrian mall and the Salem Common during lunch breaks. She'd like to see Essex Street reserved for foot traffic by day, she said, but giving cars access by night would be fine by her, especially during winter.

"After 6 o'clock at night, [car traffic] wouldn't really bother me and probably wouldn't have a great impact on anybody," Tierney-Boland said. "It would probably make it easier for people to get to CVS or do something like that."

Projects aimed at enhancing walkability are expected to continue for years to come. The Border to Boston Trail Coalition is working to connect trails across the north region, including development of a path through coastal industrial sections of Lynn, Saugus, and Revere.■

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Thu, Apr 14, 2011 at 9:45 AM

To: Linda Jonash <LJonash@rosekennedygreenway.org>

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Thanks Linda - nice to see so many different places noted!

Wendy

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