



PUTTING A PRICE ON WALKABILITY

How much is walkability worth? An intriguing new study suggests that people are willing to pay considerable premiums for houses in neighborhoods that are highly walkable — that is, where you can actually get to nearby stores, schools, and parks without having to hop in the car.

The study, conducted by a group called CEOs for Cities, looked at 90,000 homes in 15 different markets in the US, mashing up home sales data with “walkability” scores from WalkScore.com. In 13 of the 15 areas studied, homes in highly walkable neighborhoods sold on average for \$4000 to \$34,000 more than homes in neighborhoods of average walkability. The pattern held in locations as diverse as Chicago, Tucson, and Jacksonville, Florida; only in Las Vegas were more-walkable neighborhoods less desirable than less-walkable ones. To the author of the study, Joseph Cortright, this suggests that neighborhood walkability is “more than just a pleasant amenity,” and deserves far more attention from politicians and other urban leaders.

Is this study simply saying that people pay more for homes in high-density metropolitan areas? Well, no; the study controls for this effect, as well as for a host of other factors (like home size, neighborhood income levels, and access to jobs) that might have affected the results.

Still, the results should be seen as only preliminary, in part because the walkability scores they use are crude at best. The idea behind the WalkScore.com website is ingenious: you plug in your address, and the site uses Google Maps data on the locations of various businesses, schools, libraries and so on to calculate a personalized walkability score.

The problem is that this Google data is incomplete: many businesses aren’t in the database and those that are can be mischaracterized. When I punched in the address of my Chicago apartment, I got a walkability score of 97 out of 100 (“Walkers Paradise”), which seems about right; my neighborhood is lousy with restaurants, grocery stores, and all sorts of little shops. When I used the address of my parents’ suburban home, WalkScore declared their neighborhood “car dependent,” which is also correct.

The results I got all seemed more or less accurate. But the way WalkScore generates these results is still somewhat problematic. Looking into the data they used for my neighborhood, I noticed that it omitted countless restaurants, including most of my favorites, and miscategorized a bunch of different performance venues as “movie theaters.”

The authors of the study are well aware that WalkScore has what they call “both conceptual and technical limitations.” But it is still pretty good as a rough-and-ready guide to walkability, and as Google’s data gets better, so will WalkScore’s results.

The implications of the report? In the broadest sense, as Cortright notes, the results seem to confirm that many urban residents agree with urban guru Jane Jacobs that dense, mixed use neighborhoods are more vibrant and interesting than soulless planned developments or suburban sprawl.

In more practical terms, CEOs for Cities head Carol Coletta argues in her group’s press release, the study’s results “tell us that if urban leaders are intentional about developing and redeveloping their cities to make them more walkable, it will not only enhance the local tax base but will also contribute to individual wealth by increasing the value of what is, for most people, their biggest asset.”

So how walkable is your neighborhood? How much is walkability worth to you?

by David Futrelle, *Money & Main Street*, August 22, 2009