

S t r o n g C o m m u n i t i e s

PRINCIPLE

Tompkins County residents should be safe, healthy, and comfortable with the aesthetics of their communities, and have daily opportunities to interact with neighbors and community members to build strong, cohesive communities.

Where would you rather walk?



Safety, aesthetics, social perception, and infrastructure all contribute to how inviting an area is for walking.

What Makes a Strong Community?

Strong communities come in many different packages. Some can be found in clusters of houses in rural areas, others in busy urban neighborhoods, and still others in suburban subdivisions. Common characteristics of strong communities are friendly relationships between neighbors, satisfaction with the quality of the built environment, and a feeling that residents can live a safe and healthy life. There is a national trend for skilled workers and employers to move to locations – often smaller cities – that offer a variety of strong communities.

An indicator of a strong community is how frequently people walk in their neighborhoods. The presence of walkers indicates that elements of pedestrian infrastructure,

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security, convenience, and community destinations are present. Among the benefits for walkers are impromptu interactions with neighbors, which foster a sense of belonging. Walking is also a healthy, stress-relieving, and low-cost means of exercise.

Benefits of a Walkable Community

Surveys have shown that people who walk for recreation and exercise tend to walk near their homes, and people who live in neighborhoods with walkways that connect to multiple destinations walk three times as often as people who live on streets that do not connect to destinations.

Communities can be built or improved so that walking is a viable alternative. An inviting pedestrian infrastructure can reduce the need for people to drive cars to every destination. Among the many benefits of a walkable community are improved air quality, lower transportation costs, improved personal health and fitness, and expanded consumer housing choice. Another significant benefit is improved access to services for the portion of population that is too old, too young, or too poor to drive.

Walkability is defined as the degree to which people feel comfortable and safe walking to and from destinations. A good general rule of thumb is that people are willing to walk five to ten minutes to run an errand or walk to school, but for anything over that distance, the inclination shifts to driving a vehicle. A five- to ten-minute walk translates roughly into a quarter- to a half-mile in distance.

The Impact of Automobiles

With the widespread and affordable ownership of private cars, suburbanization of shopping areas, and the development of schools and other community destinations outside of existing population centers, the simple act of walking has fallen out of favor. Residential development outside of existing population centers, combined with a more sedentary lifestyle has led to fewer people walking or biking to work, school, and other destinations.

Estrangement from this basic, healthy, and enjoyable activity has had many negative consequences, among them poor human health, stress on our roadway infrastructure, degradation of the environment, and erosion of social interaction among neighbors. The overuse of automobiles has affected our well-being in numerous ways:

- **Health:** Americans in general are exercising less and eating more, with resulting dramatic increases in obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and other illnesses. Poor diet and lack of exercise is now second only to cigarette smoking as a leading cause of death in the United States.
- **Highways:** Heavy use of our streets, roads, and highways leads to deteriorating road conditions and the need for repairs that many governments are finding difficult to afford.
- **Environment:** According to the Environmental Protection Agency, 51 percent of the carbon monoxide in typical U.S. cities comes from vehicles, with vehicle emissions contributing significant amounts of the air pollutants that affect human health and the environment.
- **Social connections:** Dependence on the automobile for even the shortest household trips limits social interaction among neighbors, adding to the increasing trend of social isolation.

The Wish to Walk

The 2000 U.S. Census showed that many Tompkins County residents are walkers, much more so than other Upstate residents. In 2000, an average of 4 percent of all people walked to work in New York State (omitting New York City). In Tompkins County, 17 percent walked to work, and 1 percent rode a bicycle. In the City of Ithaca, the percentage of walkers was 41 percent. Many of the walkers are students, but even with students removed from the calculation, the countywide average for walking is 7 percent.

Another item gleaned from the 2000 Census is that the number of walking commuters in New York State declined by

24 percent from 1990 to 2000. In Tompkins County, the number of walkers declined by just 2 percent. It appears that we are a community that relies on and values walking.

The Price of Suburbanization

Traffic impacts on neighborhoods, deterioration of community infrastructure, disinvestments in existing neighborhoods, and rural and suburban isolation are problems that are increasingly impacting Tompkins County communities. Pedestrian-scale development and enhanced walkability, on the other hand, can contribute to more vital and sustainable places to live and work.

While traditional rural communities were linked together by the bonds of an agrarian economy tied to the land and grassroots cooperative problem solving, such commonality of interests and interaction is often lacking in today's suburban and rural residential areas.

Low density sprawling development creates living environments that provide few opportunities for interaction with neighbors and often lack such amenities as sidewalks and neighborhood parks that contribute to a healthy lifestyle. Health officials have made the link between built environments that encourage walking and active, healthier lifestyles. This recognition is prompted by increasing rates of obesity-related illnesses and the skyrocketing costs incurred by society to pay for medical treatment of those illnesses.

Planning trends nationwide are reacting to the proliferation of suburbs through movements such as New Urbanism, Neotraditional Planning, and Healthy Communities. In New York State an outgrowth of these movements is the Quality Communities Initiative. What these movements have in common is an attempt to create communities that derive strength and vitality from the greater interaction among neighbors and the health benefits that result from well-developed pedestrian networks and nearby availability of employment, shopping, community facilities, and other services.

A Return to Aesthetics and Community Identity

Conventional late twentieth century development patterns have helped to create a predominance of strip shopping centers and large suburban tract home developments that are, with the exception of small cosmetic variations, largely indistinguishable from one another. While such an approach may conserve costs initially and make development more profitable for some, it does little to stimulate civic pride or contribute to a strong sense of place with which community

residents can identify. Also, since low-density suburban and strip mall developments are rarely located within ten-minute walks of destinations and are rarely designed to be easily and invitingly accessible to pedestrians, these types of development patterns result in fewer pedestrian trips and increases in traffic and congestion.

While developers need to respond to basic commercial or housing needs, developments can and should also help create communities that are distinctive and unique. Fostering the

Development should not only respond to basic commercial or housing needs, but should also help create communities that are distinctive and unique.

types of physical environments that create a sense of civic pride also support a more cohesive community fabric. As a result, economic benefits accrue as well; high-quality communities with architectural and natural elements that reflect the interests of all residents are more likely to retain their economic vitality and value over time.

Communities that have a strong sense of place represent the values of their residents and reflect the unique historical, cultural, economic, and geographical context of the area. They use natural and man-made boundaries and landmarks to create a sense of defined neighborhoods, urban communities and rural hamlets. These communities encourage the construction and preservation of buildings that contribute to the look and feel of a community. Beyond the construction of buildings, these communities reflect their unique characteristics in myriad details – such as landscaping, signs, and awnings – that help to further distinguish the area for passers-by and visitors.

Guided by their own vision of how and where to grow, communities that have adopted these techniques can direct investment and development into areas that already reflect a strong sense of place. Moreover, these communities can encourage new development to make a better effort to create distinctive, unique civic assets.

Policies

It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- Facilitate the creation and maintenance of a safe, appealing, and efficient multi-purpose network for walking and enhance the pedestrian environment through appropriate design.
- Locate county facilities and encourage other community facilities to be located within population centers, particularly those facilities that provide opportunities for social interaction, group activities, community events, and meeting spaces.
- Encourage the development of diverse communities that provide a mix of uses, a variety of employment options, social and recreational opportunities, and an assortment of amenities within walking distance of residential development.
- Enhance the quality of communities by improving the character of the built environment, including visually appealing architectural elements and streetscapes that encourage pedestrian travel, facilitate community interaction, and promote public safety.
- Preserve and enhance the distinct identities and historic character of existing neighborhoods and structures, and encourage the development of new neighborhoods that possess their own special sense of place, through attractive design of public places; proximity to schools, parks and other services; and community festivals and events.
- Improve transportation options for people who need access to employment, shopping, and health services.

Action Items

Action items are activities that Tompkins County government or community partners can undertake to implement policies.

TO DO

Advance implementation of a county-wide multiuse trail network.

TO DO

Conduct pedestrian level-of-service and walkability studies in interested neighborhoods, villages, and hamlets throughout the County.

TO DO

Identify population centers and community facilities that are underserved by the existing transit system.

TO DO

Provide pedestrian connections between the waterfront and downtown residential neighborhoods through urban creek corridors.