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A NEW SHINE ON RUST BELT?

'Walkability' Can Slow City Decline

By BRUCE FISHER

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The American cities that are suffering worst in this recession are the ones whose economies are tied closely to General Motors and Ford and their supply chains. A recent survey by the Brookings Institution finds that five of the 21 large metros in the Great Lakes region — Dayton, Detroit, Grand Rapids, Toledo and Youngstown — rank among the 20 weakest metro economies in the country.

We all hope that the current downturn will be resolved soon, but what the economic analysts seem to have a hard time figuring out is whether there is something else, some other factor, that will shape a region's fate. New research of a wholly different kind suggests that if a place is pleasant and easy to walk in, folks will tend to want to live there, and will find something new to do for a living there if they possibly can.



New Urbanists are hard at work advising real estate investors to build walkable developments in the growing, sunny parts of America. Up here in the old North, where we not only made cars but shaped our entire lives around them, we face a rather stark test of the theory that walkability could mean community survivability.

The test could be as simple as this: If your mom is 75 years old and wants to move to Florida, will she stay if she feels comfortable walking to the drug store, the bank and the branch library? Will she "age in place" if she can get herself to all the other non-supermarket places that make up a city shopping strip or a village center?

If so, there is some evidence that, chances are, you and your clever and educated and discerning friends will want to live where Mom feels good about walking.

That means that the sidewalks need to be level and the street-crossing signals functional, and that the house she's living in has been remodeled, if only a little, to accommodate her increasingly limited range of motion.

These issues are gelling into an urgent question for Great Lakes metro areas because pretty much every snowy place has the same demographic fate between now and 2030: The population is going to get older, and it's going to get smaller. So if policy-makers stand by and watch lots of new housing continue

to get built, instead of older housing being maintained and retro-fitted, then the old stuff—especially in the old city centers and first-ring suburbs (where the older folks live) will be abandoned.

Places with lots of abandonment tend to spiral downward faster. Places with lots of sprawl in all the Great Lakes metro regions tend to shrink overall.

The Federal Reserve Bank of New York published a very troubling study in 2007 that shows just how unsuitable so many of old houses are for the elders who live in them. Prosaic details of everyday life — such as the fact that most pre-1980s houses have only one bathroom, and that it tends to be on the second floor — become literally life-threatening situations.

Keeping the homestead is hard when folks have to climb Mount Everest to wash their hands. But even after the remodeling gets done, and the \$10,000 retrofit of the old home allows Pop to avoid moving out to the Sunset Square Senior Ghetto, does he stand a chance negotiating the streets of home?

A new look at the walkability of our urban, suburban and village neighborhoods in western New York was undertaken on an arrestingly simple premise: that it was time to test out whether the streets around here are safe for older, slower-moving folks and others, including people who move slowly because they tend to ride in baby carriages, or whether the risk from bad drivers, bad landlords and bad concrete work make our community a bad bet.

Volunteers and staff from the Healthcare Foundation of Western and Central New York tested sidewalks, intersections, crosswalks and streetscapes all over Erie County and found that overall, Erie County is a very unwalkable place compared even to other snowy towns that are experiencing population loss. University of Buffalo geography professor Li Yin said in 2007 that the New York City borough of Queens, by contrast, was one of America's highest-scoring communities on his "walkability index," but that Buffalo in particular, especially in areas of high abandonment and bad sidewalk and curb maintenance, scores lowest. Lowest in walkability translates into least likely to work as a destination for investment, commerce, or new or revitalized housing.

When it comes to assessing local government, this is about as basic as it gets: Are the folks whose job it is to maintain the infrastructure making it work, or do you risk tripping on a busted-up sidewalk, getting run down at an unmarked crosswalk, or threatened by wannabe mobsters at an unlit bus stop?

It is not hard to understand, then, what seems to be a demographic consequence of this: Population density, and economic viability, is falling in the places where it's harder to walk.

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