WALK THIS WAY A Newsletter from MDOT

Greenbelt: How Maryland Set an Example for the Walkable Communities We Need

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What if advanced technology could somehow give us a transportation mode that was healthy, sustainable, and practically free? Maybe something that would not require expensive infrastructure, new charging stations, or acres of vehicle storage? What if even our children could use it?

The good news is that we already have what we need. It's called walking. The bad news is that in the places where most of us live, walking just isn't a safe or practical way to meet daily needs.

But communities weren't always that way. Over the past century, we rebuilt our cities, towns, and suburbs for drivers. In redesigning our environments around cars and driving, we made them hostile to everything else. Fortunately, it's easier to accommodate walkers. And if our communities were rebuilt for drivers, we can rebuild them again for pedestrians.

But why should we try? Almost everyone is used to driving everywhere, and let's face it – most people like to have a car.

Inspiration

There are plenty of good reasons to make walking more accessible. Driving takes a lot of energy, usually from gasoline, and that means carbon dioxide emissions. If we are to manage the climate emergency, this will have to change. If the car is electric, the electric power will have to be generated. If we want it to be generated mostly by wind, solar, or another sustainable energy source, we'll have to use less energy in total, so that there will be enough renewable energy to go around.

This is an essential reason, but it's also a negative reason. To change, we need inspiration, and a negative reason is uninspiring. But some of the best reasons to make walking practical are positive and attractive. Walking in an environment designed for pedestrians can be pleasant. Gosia Kung, a cofounder of WalkDenver, points out that, "people are pedestrians by design." Walking is good for us. Walking promotes personal health and wellbeing. It's good exercise – without the expense of a gym membership. And for those unable to walk, pedestrian pathways can be designed to accommodate wheeling.

It's possible to have places where some people drive while others walk – without the stress of walking with cars and trucks, or of crossing busy streets full of menacing vehicles. We can find good examples of how to do this from around the world.

A New Deal Experiment

One of the best examples is in the United States. Maryland is a pioneer of community design for walkability. For many decades, other states have boasted that they have a stretch of the legendary Route 66. It's time for Maryland to boast about Greenbelt.

Greenbelt lies in Prince George's County, about a dozen miles northeast of the U.S. Capitol building. It was conceived in the 1930s, during the Great Depression, as one of the experiments of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. An advisor to the president, Rexford Tugwell, proposed a project that would serve as a model community for the country. A cluster of inexpensive but attractive rowhouses and apartments would show that an affordable modern community could accommodate drivers and pedestrians. Even children would have safe paths they could use to walk or bicycle anywhere, without crossing busy streets. For daily needs, no one would have to drive. People without a car could still get to work on the frequent buses to Washington, D.C. As part of the same New Deal experiment, two other communities of similar design were built: Greenhills, Ohio, and Greendale, Wisconsin. But Greenbelt, Maryland, was the first of the three.

In Greenbelt, the residential density of low-rise apartment buildings and rows of attached houses left room for shared greens. Streets for cars and paths for pedestrians formed their own separate networks, each network independent of the other. Walking paths crossed the greens, connecting pedestrians to destinations without compelling them to cross busy streets. The pedestrian paths and the streets for motor vehicles converged on a small shopping center.

Greenbelt was a deeply flawed experiment in terms of racial justice. In 1937, when its first residents moved in, African-Americans were excluded – a profound but predictable injustice proving that despite all its pretentions of progressive modernity, Greenbelt was also trapped in the codified racism of its era, contributing to a legacy that still afflicts us. Greenbelt's homes were not sold or rented to Black residents until the 1960s. Yet Greenbelt's innovations in walkable and affordable urban design are no less useful. Even today, they can show us how to make communities more inclusive.

A Community of Walkers

Greenbelt began as an idea, but ideas don't always succeed in practice. Did the residents of Greenbelt walk to meet their local, daily needs? During the early years, the answer is an emphatic yes. Walking in Greenbelt was so common that near the shopping area, pedestrians overflowed into the streets. In spring 1940, some drivers complained to the editors of Greenbelt's newspaper, the Greenbelt Cooperator. The editors summarized the gist of the complaints: "pedestrians were actually crowding autos off of the half dozen streets."

To get an independent account, the editors sent two reporters out to observe conditions and report back. According to an editorial in the Cooperator of April 18, 1940, the reporters counted "more pedestrians on the streets than people in autos." A good test of a street's hospitality to pedestrians is whether parents are willing to let their children go near it. According to the editorial, in the street "there were women carrying babies, and women wheeling babies, and women with three and four children scurrying about." There were also "men with bundles," and "girls on skates." Greenbelters walked.

Walkability Makes Walking Safer

Does more walking and more cycling mean more injuries and deaths? Researchers have found that as pedestrians and cyclists grow more common on streets, streets become safer places for them. Motorists learn to expect them and to pay attention. Where pedestrians and cyclists are scarce, however, drivers typically stop expecting them, with consequences for their safety.

This means that most personal mobility within Greenbelt was not just non-polluting, healthful, and affordable, it was also relatively safe. Nevertheless, traffic engineers tended to recommend restricting walking to protect pedestrians. In pursuing this approach, they deterred walking, making it less common and more dangerous – leaving us in the fix we find ourselves in today.

Greenbelt: A Historical Example for a Future We Need

Today, car dependency is pervasive in America. Even in Greenbelt, walking is no longer ubiquitous. The casualties from traffic collisions are devastating, and so is the public health toll due to the effects of sedentary living. And though electric cars may be more sustainable than gasoline-fueled cars, sustainability will require less driving.

For health, affordability, inclusivity, and sustainability, walking must again become a practical means of meeting daily needs for millions more Americans. Fortunately, we don't have to start from scratch. We have much to learn from a community in Maryland called Greenbelt.

Peter Norton is the author of *Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City,* and of *Autonorama: The Illusory Promise of High-Tech Driving.*