

By: Jody A. Thompson, Environmental Educator
Alabama Sea Grant/Auburn Marine Center

The city of Pensacola has announced plans to construct 3 miles of sidewalks to provide access to the waterfront and more foot traffic downtown, hopefully leading to downtown revitalization. Pensacola is joining a growing number of municipalities nation-wide interested in increasing their “walkability.”

Walkability, as the term implies, describes the connections in a community that facilitate pedestrian travel as an alternative to automobile travel. Prior to World War II, most communities had a high level of walkability, meaning residents were more able to make necessary trips, such as to the grocery, on foot, making the population less dependent on car travel. The proliferation of sprawl associated with the development of suburbs has, in general, made pedestrian travel much less feasible.

More recently, municipalities have begun to re-incorporate walkability into planning their communities, partnered with a rise in downtown redevelopment and the development of greenway systems. A recent survey by the Brookings Institute highlights key findings related to national trends in walkability. There are 157 walkable urban places in the 30 largest metro areas in the U.S., with an equal number of walkable urban places in city centers and suburbs. However, the study concludes that the largest numbers of walkable urban places are those that are adjacent to downtowns. The Institute holds Washington, D.C. as a national model of walkable urban growth.

Looking at both the Brookings survey and the plans in Pensacola, it can be pointed out that walkable areas can be incorporated into planning for municipalities of many sizes. Increased walkability leads to healthier residents who have transportation options other than complete dependence on the automobile. Areas with high walkability tend to lead to a higher quality of life, something everyone desires.