

# 2017 COMMUNITY PREFERENCE SURVEY



By Brad Broberg

Three responses jump out from the latest Community and Transportation Preferences Survey by the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®.

- Six out of 10 people said they would spend more (17 percent “a lot more” and 43 percent “a little more”) to live in a community where they could walk to parks, shops and restaurants.
- More than half said they would prefer to live in a house with a small yard versus a similar house with a large yard if it enabled them to walk to more places.
- More than half also said they would prefer to live in an apartment or townhouse rather than a detached house if it meant an easy walk to places they need to go and a shorter commute to work.

While answers to most other questions showed little change from the 2015 survey, responses from the 2017 survey offer fresh insights into the increasing value people place on a walkable lifestyle.

“This is the first time that the majority of respondents indicated they would chose to live in a detached home with a smaller yard or in an apartment/townhouse if it was in a more walkable neighborhood,” said Hugh Morris, who leads the NAR’s smart growth community outreach programs.

The NAR conducts the survey every two years. It covers the 50 largest metropolitan statistical areas of the country representing 57 percent of the population. The margin of error is plus or minus 1.8 percent.

In 2015, less than half (49 percent) of the 2,000 people who were polled online preferred a house with a small yard in an easily walkable neighborhood versus a house with a large yard in a more car-dependent neighborhood. In 2017, the number rose to 53 percent of the 3,000 people polled.

A similar uptick surfaced when people were asked to choose between an apartment or townhouse in a walkable neighborhood with a shorter commute to work versus a detached house where they would have to drive more and have a longer commute to work. The apartment/townhouse option was preferred by 45 percent in 2015, but was chosen by 51 percent in 2017.

The 2015 survey included 1,000 phone responses. The 2017 survey was entirely online. The comparisons above do not include 2015 phone responses in order to make an apples-to-apples comparison.

The 2017 survey, conducted by American Strategies on behalf of NAR last September, was the first to ask people if they would be willing to spend more to live in a walkable neighborhood. Although there is no comparative data from 2015, the fact that 60 percent of respondents said they would pay at least a little more to live in a walkable neighborhood is significant, Morris said.

“I was surprised that the number was quite that high, but it’s all about lifestyle,” Morris said. “There’s a preference for a walkable lifestyle ... and everything that creates it or comes with it.”

Also worth noting, Morris said, was that out of the 40 percent of respondents who wouldn’t pay more, only half said it isn’t important to be within easy walking distance of places.

Besides the appetite for walkability expressed in the survey, NAR is experiencing increased interest in smart

growth grants and other resources it offers to state and local REALTOR® associations to support walkability projects, Morris said.

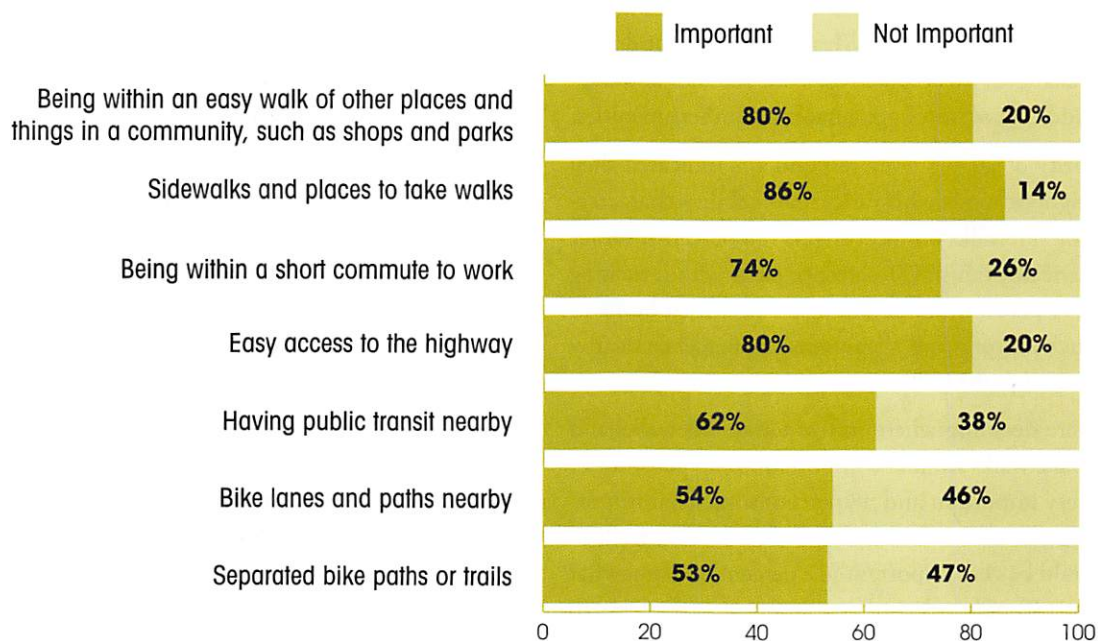
Smart growth has many characteristics, but walkability is the face of smart growth as far as most consumers are concerned. “People are not necessarily associating it with smart growth, it’s just how they want to live,” Morris said. “REALTORS® are using smart growth grants not only to make their communities more walkable, but to make walking more interesting through placemaking activities such as creating pocket parks and community gardens.”

REALTOR® Georgia Meachem, a broker from Boise, Idaho, who specializes in real estate education, said being able to walk to more places instead of having to drive is a pocketbook issue for many families.

Transportation costs — primarily the cost to own and maintain cars — can account for more than 10 percent of an average family’s budget, she said. “As people look at their household budget for places they can cut, they see transportation [savings] as something they can use on other things,” she said.

## Smart Growth features are important factors in communities

If you were deciding today where to live, how important are each of the following?



## Walkable communities are preferred

What community would you like to live in?

**53%** Houses with **small yards**, and it is **easy to walk** to the places you need to go.

OR

**47%** Houses with **large yards** and you have to **drive to** the places where you need to go.

**51%** Own or rent an **apartment or townhouse**, and you have an **easy walk** to shops and restaurants and have a **shorter commute** to work.

OR

**49%** Own or rent a **detached, single-family house**, and you have to drive to shops and restaurants and have a **longer commute** to work.



Courtesy of La Citta Vita

People also are more aware of the social, emotional and physical benefits of walking thanks to a wave of recent studies by AARP, American Heart Association and others, said Meachem.

Downtown Boise is experiencing the kind of preference for walkable living outlined in the NAR survey. “Ten years ago, people wouldn’t have traded a single-family house on a large lot to live downtown,” Meachem said, “but downtown has changed. It’s become very walkable and desirable” with the addition of stores, restaurants and other amenities.

The majority of 2017 survey respondents indicated they live in neighborhoods with various walkability characteristics led by sidewalks on most streets (76 percent). Other responses: nearby transit (71 percent); parks within walking distance (69 percent); numerous places near their home to walk to such as stores and restaurants (62 percent); nearby bike lanes and paths (62 percent).

If they were deciding where to live today, sidewalks and places to take walks would be important to 86 percent (49 percent very important and 38 percent somewhat important). Four out of five said living within an easy walk to places would be very important (42 percent) or somewhat important (38 percent). Other responses: easy access to

the highway (80 percent); short commute to work (74 percent); nearby public transit (62 percent); nearby bike lanes and paths (54 percent); separated bike paths or trails (53 percent).

In a question about daily travel preferences, four out of five respondents either strongly agreed (35 percent) or somewhat agreed (45 percent) they like walking. Almost as many (73 percent) agreed they like driving. Nearly six out of 10 people (59 percent) said they drive because they don’t have a lot of options.

Choosing from a list of six reasons to walk, the great majority cited exercise (89 percent) and enjoyment of the outdoors (86 percent). Other responses: to save money on transportation costs (49 percent); to reduce the impact on the environment (49 percent); to avoid having to park their car (39 percent); to save time (28 percent).

Choosing from a list of five kinds of walks they may have taken in the last month, more than half said they had walked for exercise (63 percent) and to run errands, shop or eat out (52 percent). Other responses: to or from public transit (27 percent); to or from work or school (23 percent); escorting children to or from school (15 percent).

Three-quarters (74 percent) said they would walk more if the places they need to go weren't so far away. Other issues respondents said prevented them from walking were: needing a vehicle for work, school or other reason (62 percent); poor or unpredictable weather (43 percent); too few sidewalks or trails (32 percent); feeling unsafe because of traffic (32 percent); feeling unsafe because of crime (30 percent); health problems (28 percent).

Despite all the interest in walking, respondents showed strong support for the needs of drivers. Maintaining and repairing roads, highways, freeways and bridges was the number one transportation need facing government in the coming years, based on responses to a list of six issues. A total of 74 percent said it was a high priority (39 percent extremely high/35 percent high).

Next came building more roads and expanding existing roads to help reduce traffic congestion with 54 percent of respondents calling it a high priority. Providing convenient alternatives to driving such as walking, biking

and public transportation and expanding public transportation were each considered a high priority by 45 percent of respondents.

Respondents were asked how they would replace gas tax revenues — the primary source of support for roads and transit — which are dwindling because cars use less and less gas. Given four choices, nearly half (49 percent) said they would not replace it at all, 21 percent would replace it with a tax based on miles driven, 17 percent would increase the gas tax and 13 percent would increase tolls or add more toll roads.

The vast majority of respondents reported that they are very satisfied (37 percent) or somewhat satisfied (45 percent) with the quality of life in their community. One-third of respondents said they live in a city, a little more than half said they live in the suburbs and the remainder said they live in a small town or rural area. Nearly six out of 10 said they own their home (57 percent) and live in a detached single-family home (58 percent). ●

## Transportation priorities within communities

For each of these issues your community may be facing over the next few years, how much of a priority should it be for the government?

