How better walkability could improve life across Chicago

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Kate MacArthur 5/2/2017

What would it take to make every Chicago neighborhood and suburb better for walking?

It's one of the big questions the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning is mulling as it prepares to develop its regional plan for 2050. The agency is hosting a series of panels and gathering community input to spur discussion on five trends and how Chicago can prepare for them.

Joanna Trotter, senior program officer of the Chicago Community Trust, leads efforts to award grants that promote equality in community development, including making them more walkable.

Trotter will be a panelist at CMAP's forum on walkable communities May 4. She talked to Blue Sky about the structural and social considerations to make walkability available to everyone.

Q: Could you quickly define what it means to be a walkable community?

A: What we mean is simply the infrastructure is in place with street, transit and bike availability and places that people want to walk. Can you walk around your neighborhood? Are sidewalks wide enough? Do you have bike lanes? Are there any transit links? Is there a place to park and walk around the corridor? Are there offerings and options for things you would want to walk to, whether it be sidewalk cafes, retail options, public health opportunities, or libraries? Is it safe and inviting?

Q: What's driving the desire to make neighborhoods more walkable?

A: There are a number of factors but I think there's more interest in being able to be in the community. It's not just about walking. It's about basic, human interactions, the surprise of bumping into people.

As we look to 2050 and see the increased reliance on technology and the diminishing opportunities for basic face-to face-interactions, walkable communities are going to become increasingly important as an essential pathway to building community. Neighborhoods and walkable communities — and the community infrastructure that supports them — will become even more important to facilitate the kind of neighborly interactions, chance meetings, and civic and community building that are so vital to our lives today.

Q: What are local examples of the challenges and opportunities to get more pedestrian friendly?

A: I've lived here since 2003 and came from outside of the region. What a surprise it was that many suburbs don't look like strip malls and housing subdivisions. You have really well-established communities like Oak Park, Aurora, Arlington Heights and Evanston, cities with important bones of more walkable neighborhoods or communities. That's what Chicago and the region has going for it.

The challenge here is that in neighborhoods and suburbs, the patterns of development and reinvestment have been very uneven. You have haves and have-nots. The south suburbs have struggled with reinvestment for many years and the south and west sides of Chicago have grappled with it. When the Metropolitan Planning Council and the Urban Institute did a study on Chicago segregation, compared to the 100 largest regions we're the fifth-most economically and racially segregated region. That, to me, is the biggest challenge.

Q: How do you fix that?

A: It's really about how we support targeted investment where markets have been overlooked for decades with

historic segregation and disinvestment. How do we rethink the way we're investing, particularly in areas that have been struggling for years? It's about revitalization of communities.

Q: What does it take in time, money and other resources to accomplish these goals?

A: I see them as part of a continuum. The Chicago Community Trust funding, with our great rivers, it's looking at the asset of the Chicago River and other parts of the region as a bold vision for the future.

We have our lakefront, we've protected it — and the rivers, not so much. This is a bold vision that will take decades to fully build out, not just for the riverfront but inviting people and giving access to the riverfront. You can start to plan and implement now along the entire river.

Q: What social infrastructure needs to be in place to adapt to walkable communities?

A: The soft aspects in terms of lighting and the cultural component, the thing that celebrates the life and identity of a community, are important. You need local options, unique options that you can't find everywhere. That's what makes people want to walk to explore their neighborhoods. If I have sense of culture, history and unique offerings, that's going to make it more walkable and attractive so it doesn't look like every one of the 77 neighborhoods in Chicago or 284 municipalities in the suburbs.

Q-and-As are edited for clarity and length.

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