

# PROPERTY

## Study: Philly's 'Burbs Would Be Stronger If They Walked the Walk Like Cities

*The head of a developers' advocacy group explains why walkable urban places are so valuable and explores whether we can get more of them in more places.*

By [Sandy Smith](#) | May 6, 2016 at 4:03 pm

One of the distinctive features of the metropolitan Philadelphia landscape is the high number of walkable Main Streets scattered throughout the suburbs. Ardmore, Bryn Mawr, Collingswood, Doylestown, Haddonfield, Jenkintown, Media, Narberth...the list goes on.

What we lack, apparently, is big-time walkable downtowns. We have only one of those, and it's gathering all of the Millennial and Baby Boomer urbanites into its fold along with a good chunk of the new construction taking place around the region.

Places like these are what LOCUS calls "WalkUPs" — "walkable urban places." [LOCUS](#), an affiliate of [Smart Growth America](#), is an advocacy group consisting of developers committed to producing more sustainable communities. Director Christopher Coes describes LOCUS as a "triple bottom line" organization: "Our developments should be a net positive for the environment and the local community" as well as for the developer, he said.

Besides advocating for practices and policies that promote more compact, walkable development that promotes both community interaction and multimodal transportation, LOCUS also supports research that demonstrates the economic benefits of such development. Two years ago, and again next month, a research study produced by the George Washington University with support from LOCUS assessed (and will reassess) the current level and extent of walkable regional centers and the potential for future ones to arise in the nation's 30 largest metropolitan areas.

One statistic that might surprise Philadelphians, given how much we tout the walkability of both the city and many of its suburbs, is that the study, called "[Foot Traffic Ahead](#)," put this area in the middle of the pack when it comes to walkable regional centers. This region placed 13th out of the 30 metros, with 17 "WalkUPs" accounting for 19 percent of the region's total office and retail space; 95 percent of that walkable commercial real estate is located in the central city. For comparison purposes, 45 WalkUPs account for 43 percent of top-ranked Greater Washington's office and retail space, and slightly over half of that pedestrian-oriented space is located in the suburbs.

The study also puts Philadelphia in the middle of the pack when it comes to the likelihood that it will develop more walkable regional centers in the future.

There have already been some small-scale efforts at turning what LOCUS calls “drivable sub-urban” regional centers into “walkable urban” ones in this region. The former Echelon Mall in Voorhees, for instance, was partially demolished and replaced with mixed-use residential, office and retail buildings arrayed along a pedestrian-scale street; to emphasize the former mall’s new role, Voorhees Township moved its offices into the new [“Voorhees Town Center.”](#) Right now, on the southern edge of Media, the Granite Run Mall is undergoing [a similar demolition and makeover](#). Even builders of conventional auto-oriented, single-use retail centers pay lip service to the walkability principle in developments such as [Main Street at Exton](#), which is slated to get a residential component in 2017.

Then there’s King of Prussia, home to the largest [shopping mall](#) in America as measured by total selling space and the largest employment center in the Philadelphia suburbs. The [King of Prussia District](#) has embarked on [a project](#) to transform parts of the car-centric edge city into more walkable places by narrowing thoroughfares, adding residences to shopping complexes, converting office buildings to mixed-use residential structures and adding a rail line that will connect almost all of the new developments to the mall, Norristown and Philadelphia.