

## Reuters Story: Walkable towns curb obesity, pollution

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Designing walkable communities is a cost-effective way to address the growing epidemic of obesity in the United States and cut down on harmful car emissions and pollution, a researcher told the American College of Sports Medicine's 12th annual Health and Fitness Summit in Long Beach, California.

The problem, said Jim Sallis from San Diego State University, is that local zoning laws essentially prevent the development of walkable communities. "Zoning laws today," he told Reuters Health, "really enforce the separation of uses; they are designed to move cars as quickly as possible -- which is dangerous to pedestrians."

Sallis recently took a tour with urban planners in a new development in San Diego designed to be walkable. "The developers told me they had to get 25 waivers from zoning laws to put in the development. All that kind of paperwork costs the developer time and money so it discourages them from building walkable neighborhoods," Sallis said.

He encourages people to "be a voice for walkable neighborhoods and parks in your area and help change local zoning laws."

Sallis would also like to dispel the misconception that walkable communities are more expensive to build. They aren't, he said, noting that money spent on building, maintaining and expanding roadways could be re-allocated to building sidewalks and trails.

Walkable cities "have worked for thousands of years," Sallis points out. The most walkable cities are on the east coast of the U.S. because they are older. "Any city built in the 1800s is likely to be walkable because everyone who lived there walked. Cities like Boston, Manhattan, Washington D.C., inner Baltimore, Savannah, Charleston, are all very walkable," he noted.

In the west there are fewer walkable cities, except for Portland, which has made a concerted effort to make the city pedestrian-friendly, Sallis said. "Many years ago, Portland set up policies for transportation planning that make pedestrians a first priority, cyclists second, public transit riders third, and car drivers last. It's now one of the most activity-friendly cities in the country."

"The suburbs have really been designed to take away the option of walking to places; there are no sidewalks, everything is spread out, and there is really only one way to get around and that is by car," according to Sallis.

The good news, he said, is that more and more communities are embracing the idea of becoming more activity-friendly by adopting "mixed-use" area laws.