

Policies and tools planners use to support pedestrian-oriented downtowns in North Texas

by

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A REPORT

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Abstract

Suburban downtowns in North Texas have been shaped by car-centric development for decades, making walking or biking anywhere inconvenient and uncomfortable for daily travel. This report looks at how three North Dallas suburbs, Allen, Frisco, and McKinney, are using planning policies, design tools, and different economic strategies to help shift more towards pedestrian-oriented downtowns. Using an approach that looks at planning documents and interviews with city planners, the study identifies priorities that all three cities share, like street design, community engagement, and making the downtowns in these cities more connected. While each of the cities is on different steps of the implementation process, it is clear that there is momentum and excitement towards designing for people before cars, even with the suburban culture with expectations of car convenience. This report concludes by giving recommendations for deepening public health considerations when it comes to pedestrian-oriented development, and more recommendations about how North Dallas suburbs can better their downtown development.

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Introduction

Currently, the United States has a large car-dependency problem. Many of the suburbs in the United States were built around cars, instead of around people, which means that driving can sometimes be the only realistic option for people to get from place to place. The main issue I wanted to look at was the car dependency problem within suburban downtown areas. I wish to answer the research question: What policies and tools do planners implement to move from car-centric suburban downtowns to pedestrian-oriented downtowns in North Texas? Through this question, I found that designing with pedestrians in mind, pedestrian-oriented development was a good solution to our car-centric infrastructure within North Texas. The literature review below elaborates on the importance and benefits of pedestrian-oriented development, especially in suburban downtown areas. Suburban downtowns are important because they help to foster community, attract small businesses, and make it so that residents do not need to travel into downtown Dallas to obtain the community that most downtowns foster.

Pedestrian-oriented development is important because it promotes safe, accessible, and comfortable public spaces and provides many benefits that can increase the quality of life. North Dallas suburbs are some of the wealthiest and fastest-growing areas in Texas as a whole, and residents often prioritize convenience, appearance, and amenities, which tend to reinforce a car-centric lifestyle. Residents in the North Dallas area like to drive to walkable shopping malls or drive to specific areas to walk around; however, they do not always like the idea of being forced to walk around in their own areas, and tend to prefer cars when talking about the areas they live in. Many residents in the Dallas area place a higher value on economic development than public health or environmental sustainability, which can be different than other cities or states. The benefit that I have chosen to focus on is the benefit of public health. While this is an important

benefit, it is not the most important benefit to people living in North Dallas; however, this is the factor that I have decided to take the time to research. There are many ways to measure public health, including physical, mental, social, behavioral, and more. To narrow down my public health categories, I focused primarily on public health in relation to the physical health of the community. This project looks at physical health specifically because there is a clear intersection between planning and public health, where design choices like street connectivity, park access, land use, and pedestrian infrastructure can help to produce measurable health outcomes. Figure 1 shows a map of the three cities researched in comparison to Dallas.

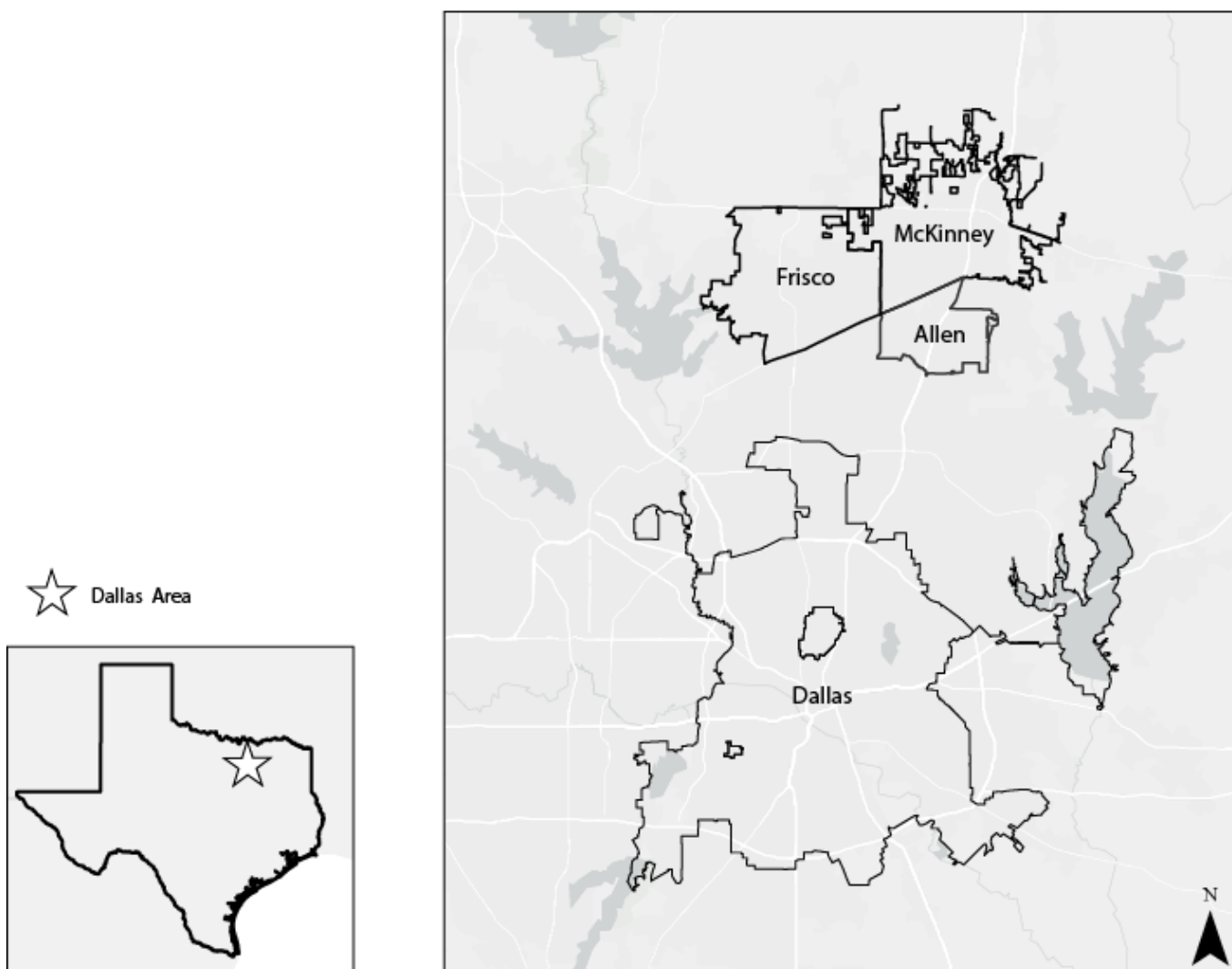


Figure 1. Map of North Dallas Area

Review of the Literature

Introduction to Literature

Pedestrian-oriented development is the focus of this literature review, specifically as it relates to suburban downtown area transformations. Since my research is looking at how to bring more pedestrian-oriented development into suburban downtown areas, it is important to define how we are using pedestrian-oriented development in this report. In this case, pedestrian-oriented development is defined as development that prioritizes walking and cycling as opposed to private vehicles. This development also prioritizes safe, accessible, and comfortable public spaces for pedestrians.

Within this definition is walkability. High walkability is a factor that contributes to pedestrian-oriented development, specifically in the downtown area. Walkability, as used in this research, refers to the extent to which an area allows for walking. In this report, having a walkable area is shown as beneficial. Through a thorough look into the literature collected, we were able to give some main thoughts that are collective throughout the planning field.

This literature review paper will first guide you through the methods of collecting these sources, deconstructing each source to identify what is most important within the context of this paper's research perspective. The literature below has enhanced our overall understanding of the significance of pedestrian-oriented development in downtown areas, with themes specifically relating to car dependency, public health, environmental and economic impacts, and information regarding equity and culture. The purpose of this is to synthesize the findings to create a deeper understanding of pedestrian-oriented development and how it can reshape the suburbs for the better.

Review of Literature Methods

Through the K-State library system and Google Scholar, I was able to find around forty-five widely cited papers and books relating to pedestrian-oriented development within the realms of downtown areas, car-dependency solutions, and the impacts of development, specifically relating to the positive and negative outcomes of creating an area that is more pedestrian-friendly. The keywords used included ‘walkability,’ ‘downtown,’ ‘cars + walkability,’ ‘health + walkability,’ ‘pedestrian-oriented development’ as well as many other words relating to ‘economy,’ ‘equity,’ ‘culture,’ ‘pedestrian-oriented downtown,’ and some research on suburban downtowns. Through the use of these keywords, I was able to find many different case studies, research, and data that pertained to pedestrian-oriented development, car dependency, downtown areas, and health, including mental, physical, and social health.

Several studies emphasized the correlation between reduced car dependency and improved community engagement, highlighting how walkable environments foster stronger social connections. Additionally, I found multiple sources that analyzed policy interventions to enhance pedestrian accessibility, discussing the role of urban design in shaping walkable neighborhoods. Some research also addressed economic factors, showing how increased foot traffic in downtown areas benefits local businesses and contributes to economic vitality. By reviewing these sources, I gained a deeper understanding of the complexities of pedestrian-oriented development and its broader implications on urban life.

Pedestrian Oriented Development

Pedestrian-oriented development is broken down into many different key elements in the research *Travel Choices in Pedestrian Versus Automobile Oriented Neighborhoods* written by Robert Cervero and Carolyn Radisch. Some of the key features that the authors pointed to were

compact form, mixed-use, grid-like street patterns, walkable sidewalk infrastructure, transit accessibility by foot, and a pedestrian commercial district. This study was a comparison between two cities, Rockridge, which is more pedestrian-oriented, and Lafayette, which has much more car dependency. “The greatest modal split differences between the two neighborhoods were actually in terms of the access trips of BART commuters — 31 percent of access trips to the Rockridge BART station were by foot, compared to only 13 percent of those to the Lafayette station”(Cervero and Radisch, 1996, 24). So, in Rockridge, many more people were walking to the transit system, reinforcing that there is value in pedestrian accessibility to support transit use. This article reinforces the importance of many factors working together to create a pedestrian-oriented city to increase citizens’ quality of life and overall ease of movement within the community.

In the document written by Laurel Harbin, the author found through their research in the LaVilla district that when creating a pedestrian-oriented district, human-scaled design elements, public engagement, and sustainable and programmable spaces that encourage social interaction are important in the design of one of these districts. The author found that in an area that already had a good community identity, making the space pedestrian oriented only strengthened that identity through elements like historical materials and art pieces. “Sidewalks are an important element of the proposed development, and contribute to a sense of community by acting as a public space where people interact both verbally and non-verbally” (Harbin, 2005, 71). In their design study, the authors found that distinct pedestrian zones for resting and social areas are important to add a pedestrian emphasis in the district. Notably, when sidewalks and storefronts were designed to a human scale with walkability in mind, this was one of the major findings that helped to increase the pedestrian-oriented development.

Eliot Rose, Nicola Szibbo, and Ayrin Zahner conducted an evaluation of pedestrian-oriented developments by selecting four case studies across the U.S. and evaluating them based on travel behavior, economics, environmental factors, and social performance. The study found that generally, the developments had lower vehicle miles traveled and higher non-auto mode shares, higher rents and occupancy rates, lower emissions and energy use, and the public spaces were heavily used, which contributes highly to interactions and social cohesion. The authors write that “Pedestrian-oriented developments hold the promise of reducing automobile dependence, creating more livable communities, and achieving important economic, environmental, and social objectives” (Rose et al., 2010, 1). This contributes to the understanding that pedestrian-oriented developments are overall good and produce a lot of benefits.

Overall, the three articles agree that pedestrian-oriented development supports walkability, social interaction, and environmental goals, and agree that form is an important factor in the behavior and function of an area. However, each article has its differences. For example, Rose et al. focus on more measurable, quantifiable outcomes, whereas Harbin is more design and community-driven and implies that success in pedestrian-oriented areas may not be measurable. Cervero and Radisch look mostly into transportation behavior change, whereas Harbin looks at transportation behavior but mostly looks at pedestrian behavior in her study.

Downtown

The relationship between downtown areas and pedestrian-oriented development is ultimately beneficial in giving us the realization of why this development is so important. The literature found to explain the relationship between downtowns and walkability used the research methods of surveys, analysis, theory, studies, and spatial analysis to conclude their findings. The authors of these books and articles that I have collected all have different ways of how

walkability can be incorporated into the downtown areas, and they all have the same goal of increasing walkability in the downtown area and thus improving the lives of people in downtown areas.

Jeff Speck, an American city planner and writer, writes that in downtown areas, trees “offer shade, they reduce ambient temperatures in hot weather, absorb rainwater and tailpipe emissions, provide UV protection, and limit the effects of wind. Trees also slow cars and improve the sense of enclosure by ‘necking down’ the street space with their canopies” (Speck, 2012, 223). In his book *Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time*, Speck illuminates the importance of walkability and the ten steps to achieve walkability, specifically a walkable city. Speck writes, “It’s best not to pick favorites in the walkability discussion- but the humble American street tree might win my vote” (Speck, 2012, 223). In this book, the author strongly believes that one aspect to greatly improve walkability, specifically in the downtown areas, is simply a tree. This is interesting because Speck is communicating to us as readers that by adding something as small and insignificant (or what we think is insignificant) as a tree, this tree will be so beneficial that it will create a change that will spur more opportunity for walkability and thus increase the abilities of pedestrian oriented development.

Ken Worpole’s book is all about the perceptions of town centers. Worpole argues that recently there has been a loss of culture in town centers and having “lost many of their traditional functions- as meeting places, as centers of social, political and cultural life” (Worpole, 1992, 1). Many of these places are very busy during the day with a lot of commercial activities; however, they are left as ghost towns at night. One of the author's main ideas to bring life back into downtown areas is simply allowing more people to live in the city center. “The drawbacks to predestination, it was claimed, came at night when pedestrianized areas became almost

completely deserted” (Worpole, 1992, 46). In these cities, there was much car traffic during the day, but at night, there was very little pedestrian or vehicle traffic within the city center. “If safety issues prevent people from coming into town centers at night, then having more people living in town center accommodations can only improve matters” (Worpole, 1992, 47). Worpole suggests that by adding more accommodation within the city center, people will feel safer since there will be more activity and more eyes on the ground.

The book, *What Do People Do Downtown*, written by Davies, Love, and Ziegler, does a deep dive into surveys, parking analysis, and observation all around the downtown areas. Unlike many of the other books in this section, the authors focus primarily on small towns and their main streets. The main streets are “not defined so much geographically or architecturally as it is socially” (Davies et al., 1981, 3). The authors give the reader surveys and tools that they can complete for their city, and once the reader uses the tools, the reader should be able to make effective decisions about their own downtown. One of the biggest takeaways from this handbook is involvement and engagement. Throughout this entire book, the reader is told time and time again to involve volunteers, learn from the public’s opinions, and engage in meaningful discussions with different people in the community. One of the suggestions in the handbook is to “Hold informal discussions with people concerned about downtown” (Davies et al., 1981, 11). The authors stress the importance of inclusion, especially for people who are wary about the next steps in the process for downtown areas.

The book written by Reid Ewing and Keith Bartholomew, *Pedestrian and Transit-Oriented Design*, includes many checklists for essential, desirable, and worthwhile features for different communities, depending on density and other factors surrounding these communities. While the book has many different solutions and factors to create a more pedestrian-friendly environment,

shortening the length of blocks in cities is very helpful when it comes to improving connectivity. “A dense network of streets disperses traffic so that each street carries less traffic and can be scaled accordingly, making streets more pleasant to walk along and easier to cross” (Ewing and Bartholomew, 2013, 29). By creating smaller blocks, it designs streets to be more pedestrian-friendly since the scale is more appropriate for people to walk around in.

A key to increasing pedestrian-oriented development in downtown areas includes making it more comfortable and convenient for pedestrians to enjoy themselves. Randall suggests that people are less likely to walk around if there is a “common occurrence of trash and debris on sidewalk[s]” (Randall, 2020, 59). He also suggests that “the greater the slope, the more difficult the walk and the poorer the walking experience” (Randall, 2020, 63). By making the walking experience more comfortable, people will be much more confident in walking to and from work, school, or when they go shopping.

All of these authors have different ideas of how to incorporate pedestrian-oriented development into downtown areas. Each of these books and articles offers perspectives on how to improve walkability and downtown development in different areas, but they share common themes of accessibility, safety, and pedestrian comfort. Speck emphasizes the importance of trees that provide shade, slow down cars, and make streets feel more inviting. Worpole argues that increasing residences can make city centers feel safer and more vibrant at night. Davies, Love, and Ziegler shift the focus to community involvement and public discussions to change walkability and pedestrian development solutions to local needs. Ewing and Bartholomew advocate for many ideas, including shorter blocks to help enhance connectivity and pedestrian accessibility. Randall highlights the importance of maintenance, pointing out that trash, debris, and steep slopes discourage walking. While these authors differ in their primary approaches,

whether it be greenery, urban design, social engagement, or infrastructure, they all conclude that pedestrian-oriented development and walkable neighborhoods require thoughtful planning, safety considerations, and an environment that encourages people to choose walking as a natural, enjoyable part of daily life.

Suburban Downtown

Since my project specifically examines suburban downtowns, this section dives into the unique circumstances of suburban streets and how to transform them into places people want to go and explore. A current problem with suburban downtowns is that most of the time, the downtown area is built for cars more than people. Due to this, when people want to go downtown, it is usually for a specific purpose instead of exploring the area or walking downtown.

The suburbs that I looked at are mostly already designed, but not in a pedestrian-oriented way. The paper *Redesigning Suburbia for Walking and Transit: Emerging Concepts*, written by Atash, looks at the differences between Traditional Neighborhood Development and Pedestrian Pocket Development. Traditional Neighborhood Development focuses on compact, mixed-use, walkable communities by using grid networks. This type of development reduces the internal vehicle miles traveled and offers excellent pedestrian and bike infrastructure; however, Traditional Neighborhood Development usually lacks transit options integrated with the active infrastructure. Pedestrian Pockets are built completely with a transit system in mind. This type of development clusters housing, jobs, and everything you could need within a five-minute walk from transit stations. While Pedestrian Pockets require heavy zoning and transit planning, they are more long-term solutions. “American postwar suburbs have been designed so that every activity (residential, office space, retail, and community services) is typically more than a 5-

minute walk from everything else. This has made the suburban environment automobile-oriented and anti-pedestrian” (Atash, 1994, 49). This is one of the main difficulties when it comes to suburban downtowns: they were created so that every use is separated, and the American public needs to utilize cars to travel around relatively short distances.

While Atash offers a design approach to fix the current suburban downtowns, Martin looks at the social consequences of current suburban downtowns. In Martin’s study, he finds that “Commuters participate less than non-commuters in voluntary associations and informal groupings in the residence community” (Martin, 1956, 449). Martin defines commuters as people who travel outside of their suburb to a nearby city for work. With this daily commute, Martin argues that people who live in the suburbs participate less in their suburbs. When this article was written, many more wives were staying home to care for the house, so the author found that women often took on bigger roles in community engagement within their city. This has changed since the research was done in 1956. However, women are usually still socially expected to volunteer, especially in their kids’ school PTA or sports club. Now, fewer people who live in the suburbs commute into the city than in 1956 due to the rise of suburban jobs and virtual jobs. It would be interesting to do this study again now, since so much has changed since the study was done in 1956.

Martin helps to lay the groundwork to understand social suburban life, and Farhad investigates ways to fix the current suburb models to make the downtown suburbs more pedestrian-friendly. Lastly, Cervero discusses suburbs with a transportation focus, offering solutions and strategies for the suburban areas. Cervero found that due to the decentralization of suburban jobs and housing, traditional transit systems do not work as well. He also found that “suburban residents and workers tend to be more affluent and own more cars than do their

central-city counterparts” (Cervero, 1994, 3). The lifestyle patterns in suburbs directly challenge efficiency and call for transit services. The author found that by adapting transit to work with low-density, car-centric areas, cities can start with small steps to create a more connected network within their community. Cervero concludes with his research that fixed-route transit will not work in suburbs without major reforms; however, integration of transit with land use can help transit go farther in suburbs.

Car Dependency

Car dependency in U.S. cities is a growing problem; many cities within the United States were built around the automobile. The following articles mention systems to reduce this car dependency, particularly in the United States. Car dependency indicates a lack of investment in safe or easy-to-use pedestrian infrastructure and public transit and creates too much reliance on private vehicles for everyday transportation. In this section, we learn about some solutions to the problem of car dependency.

The study to reduce car dependency by developing policies and interventions, conducted by Hunter, Cleland, Kee, Longo, and Murtagh, found that reducing car dependency is difficult. Since the automobile is so ingrained in the urban systems of cities, deeper approaches to combat this include many factors, such as new policies, infrastructure improvements, and fundamental behavioral changes. The authors write that “shifting from car reliance to more sustainable and healthier modes of travel, such as public transport, walking and/or cycling, and also reducing the need to travel in the first place for some purposes and activities” may ultimately be beneficial to people who live and visit cities (Hunter et al., 2021, 8). Since a lot of the United States cities were built around the automobile, this has created car-oriented land use patterns, which reduces

viable transportation available to people and discourage walking because of safety concerns and infrastructure limitations.

The article written by Freishtat and Yin discusses Chicago's main efforts to reduce car dependency, especially through transit-oriented development. Chicago wanted to make sustainable transportation, like walking, cycling, and public transportation, a more attractive alternative to driving. When the population "feel[s] like they can't rely on the transit system, when they feel unsafe biking around their communities, when they think crime has increased... people seek out their cars... [like a] safety blanket" (Freishtat and Yin, 2022, 3). Making the sustainable transit system better, easier, safer, and cheaper than a personal vehicle gives communities a viable choice to choose a better option.

The last study on car dependency that I found was a study in Oslo, Norway. In the study, the city limited car access within the city center, expanded pedestrian spaces, and improved public transportation and cycling infrastructure. Oslo's "project aimed to reduce the amount of carbon emissions from vehicles while consequently improving the city environment and city life by encouraging for a more pedestrian city center" (Douay & Minja, 2021, 87). While at this current moment in the United States, this would not be feasible, it is interesting and important to find studies that take drastic measures. The authors found that by reducing car access within the city center, they were able to increase pedestrian spaces available and increase urban life, and Oslo has since drastically reduced greenhouse gas emissions.

These three studies each tackle car dependency, each looking at the challenges within the context of each study and city. The main ideas from the authors find that, especially in the United States, there is a strong-rooted nature of car dependency, which needs to be addressed through policy changes and infrastructure improvements. Also, focusing on making it easier for people to use

sustainable transportation is a great step toward increasing pedestrian-oriented development and making public transport more attractive. Finally, Oslo takes a much more aggressive approach to increasing walkability by getting rid of cars altogether. All these studies teach us that through government intervention and a community behind them, there can be less reliance on cars in U.S. cities.

Environment

Relating directly to the benefits of pedestrian-oriented development is helping the environment by reducing pollution and encouraging green transportation. The paper *Impact of Weather on Commuter Cyclist Behaviour and Implications for Climate Change Adaptation* describes how different types of weather, including rain, wind, sun, and temperature, affect commuter cyclist volume across four sites chosen in Melbourne. The study found that the weather has a significant impact on commuter cycling, with heavy rain reducing ridership by around forty percent. The authors found that due to climate change, residents can “expect higher temperatures, more variability in precipitation, coupled with more intense storms when it does rain, and increases in wind speed”, which will all have a negative effect and reduce volumes of commuter cyclists (Ahmed et al., 2010, 15). This study finds that as climate change gets worse, there will be fewer cyclists commuting to work, which will further exacerbate the effects of climate change.

The research paper written by Katherine Shiver studies four neighborhoods in Austin, Texas, to learn about walking patterns, trip structure, perceptions of walking, and personal factors as they relate to the environment and walking as transportation. The neighborhoods could be split into two categories: Traditional neighborhoods, which have a grid street layout and short blocks with higher levels of walking for commuting and shopping, and modern neighborhoods,

with larger blocks, separated land uses, and less frequent walking with predominantly recreational walking for exercise. The study found that overall, neighborhood design—specifically street connectivity, land uses, and urban form heavily influences pedestrian behavior, including purpose, distance, and intensity of walking. By changing how neighborhoods are designed, we can increase walkability to reduce pollution and car dependency. Shiver states, “Walk-activity patterns are influenced by the potential for interaction as determined by directness and number of route choices, the variety and distance of destinations” (Shiver, 1997, 74).

Urbanization as a Response to Carbon Loading, the research paper written by Nolon and Bacher, reviews how zoning and land use laws that the government puts into place reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The study found that denser cities like New York produce significantly less greenhouse gas emissions per capita due to compact development, smaller residences, and more public transit use. The authors argue that when planned thoughtfully, urbanization can be a strategic response to climate change. Due to climate change impacts growing, the authors urge people that “the time to act is now”, indicating a need to start producing less greenhouse gas emissions by creating denser communities (Nolon and Bacher, 2007, 213).

Health

When researching pedestrian-oriented development, one of the major themes was health. Mental health, physical health, and social health were at the forefront of many articles surrounding improving walkability and creating communities that are people-first. Health is a positive factor that comes out of an area where it is more walkable. The next few articles we review are centered on health.

Beyond Mobility, written by Robert Cervero, Erick Guerra, and Stefan Al, through their research, found that “Cities that invite walking and cycling can help reverse the trend toward sedentary urban living” (Cervero et al., 2017, 25). A bike study from Bogotá, Colombia, found that when roads have higher connectivity and when they are denser, the likelihood of residents meeting the minimum standards of daily activity was much higher. By having a more walkable city, people are much more likely to choose the healthier alternative in their prospective cities. “Nine separate studies showed that the use of public transportation increased walking times by 8 to 33 minutes because it typically involves some walking to stations or bus stops” (Cervero et al., 2017, 28). There is a direct correlation between increasing public transportation, as well as making streets more accessible, and public health.

Alternatively, in the paper written by Brita Roy and other authors, the main takeaway was that neighborhood walkability was not associated with better health outcomes- mental or physical health. However, the study did find that higher social support was linked to better mental health outcomes after six months of the study. The authors wrote, “Efforts to improve physical and mental health among older adults surviving AMI may be more effective if they incorporate indoor venues for physical activity and social support” (Roy et al., 2021, 1). The authors went on to say that group exercise or walking in malls or schools would be most beneficial to seniors suffering from acute myocardial infarction.

The main findings of the research, Walking School Bus Line Routing for Efficiency, Health and Walkability: A Multi-objective Optimization Approach, written by Wang and other authors, found that the Walking School Bus route significantly influences children’s exposure to pollutants from vehicle emissions, which affects the children’s health. Through their research, they found that traffic safety and comfort are major barriers to walking, and with the help of

route planning, cities can prioritize getting rid of those barriers. Through the Walking School Bus, the authors found that “Walkability covers the needs of both parents and children in terms of their views on safety and comfort” (Wang et al., 2023, 126). The study illuminated the importance of taking the first steps into lessening pollution and increasing walkability based on different communities’ views to help communities become more pedestrian-oriented.

The research paper Neighborhood Walkability, Neighborhood Social Health, and Self-Selection Among U.S. Adults found that neighborhood walkability is positively associated with social interactions and a sense of community. This study has found that walkability may promote the social health of neighborhoods, which in turn, benefits physical and mental health. The authors find that “Walkable neighborhoods with destinations, but also public realm... can provide favorable environmental conditions that make unplanned and repeated interactions with neighbors likely” (Carson et al, 2023, 6). Walkability supports social cohesion in this way by increasing interactions between neighbors and reducing social isolation, which was linked to better mental and physical outcomes.

Zhehao Zhang and other contributors conducted a study to look at how perceived walkability on college campuses has direct and indirect positive effects on students’ mental health and life satisfaction. In the study, academic performance had the strongest indirect effect on mental health, whereas social capital had the strongest effect on life satisfaction. Unsurprisingly, the study also found that COVID-19 negatively impacted students’ mental health and life satisfaction. “Building a walkable environment can effectively prevent mental health disorders and promote life satisfaction” (Zhang et al., 2024, 2). The study overall found that when students felt like they were in a more walkable environment, they were happier and had an

overall higher life satisfaction and mental health than people who perceived they were not in a walkable environment- even if they were in the same environment.

Joel de Almeida Siqueira and other authors conducted a study looking at how pedestrian-oriented development affects mental health in older adults, specifically looking at cognitive impairment and depressive symptoms. The authors write, “Older adults residing in places with a high and highest walkability index were 38% and 44% less likely to have cognitive impairment, respectively” (Siqueira et al., 2022, 1). This suggests that planners should consider the benefits of cognitive health, especially relating to walkability, because those numbers show that mental health in older adults can drastically change when having a more walkable area. The study overall showed no big association between increased walkability and depressive symptoms. From the studies above, it is very clear that pedestrian-oriented development and more specifically, walkability can play a significant role in public health, and its effects can vary based on demographics, infrastructure, and neighborhood context. The research shows that walkable environments can encourage physical activity, promote social cohesion, and reduce pollution, all of which connect back to having better physical and mental health. However, as Roy and other authors highlighted, simply having a walkable neighborhood may not always be enough. Sometimes, it’s important to have social support and access to indoor physical activity spaces for older adults. While it is not a universal link between pedestrian-oriented development and every health example, there is significant evidence to show that prioritizing walkable and accessible spaces benefits communities in so many ways.

Economics

To make pedestrian-oriented development worth it to most people, developers and businesses, it needs to be profitable. The study by Volker and Handy created a systematic

literature review that studied spending by travel modes, including biking, walking, transit, and car. The study overall found that cyclists and pedestrians often spend more money per month than motorists; however, they spend less money per trip than motorists. The authors also found through their study, “that bicycle lanes and cycle tracks tend to have either positive or neutral effects on local businesses, particularly for retail and food service businesses” (Volker & Handy, 2021, 7). A big problem with getting pedestrian-oriented development approved is opposition due to fear of lost car access and fewer business revenues; however, the evidence found in this article largely refutes these concerns. Especially for small, local businesses, switching to pedestrian-oriented development would be an overall neutral or positive economic effect.

The research paper *Measuring the Local Economic Impacts of Replacing On-Street Parking with Bike Lanes* looks at the difference-in-differences approach, looking at retail sales data from Toronto, Canada. Overall, there was no evidence of a significant decline in sales in areas where they replaced on-street parking with bike lanes. “In fact, we find evidence of positive and statistically significant impacts on sales in the food services and drinking places sector following the installation of the Bloor Street bike lane” (Arancibia et al, 2019, 19). While both studies speak about bike lanes and the impacts on sales and local businesses, Volker and Handy’s article found that there are lots of positive and neutral effects, whereas Arancibia et al found that there is no statistically significant evidence to prove a decline in sales, an increase in food service sales, but no significant change in clothing and accessories sales.

Equity + Culture

The article *Living Streets: A Pathway Toward Inclusive, Equitable and Accessible Communities* looks at existing research, case studies, and planning policy reviews to further understand the importance of equity and culture within streets. The authors found that streets

should be able to serve a diverse number of users by using designs led by community members from different backgrounds to be able to address systemic inequities and historic disinvestment in certain neighborhoods. “Streets should emphasize and prioritize the cultural significance of a place...”, by creating better streets near affordable housing, planners can “improve the experience for POC & low-income people” (Moore et al., 2019, 19, 24). By prioritizing access and design to pedestrian-oriented development, we can increase safety and accessibility to further equity for different cultures and accessibility problems.

Lang’s article looks at how walking in urban environments is not simply a way of transit or physical activity, but it is a socially meaningful practice for everyday life. “As pedestrians, we contribute to culture through our ability to experience, express, pause, and collaborate” (Lang, 2022, 12). While the Moore et al. article focuses on social justice, accessibility and inclusive design through practical application of inclusive street design, Lang’s article looks at how everyday interactions within pedestrian space can introduce social experiences otherwise missed if there was no emphasis on a walkable environment around neighborhoods.

Conclusion

Pedestrian-oriented development is an extremely important factor in shaping urban life, influencing downtown areas, transportation choices, and creating new ideas surrounding environmental, health, economic, equity, and cultural benefits. Across many of the studies I reviewed, we have found that this kind of development fosters community, encourages healthy lifestyles, and reduces the environmental impact of humans. While some researchers suggest that walkability alone cannot guarantee better health outcomes, it is a big step in creating a more sustainable and accessible urban environment. Ultimately, planners and policymakers must

recognize that pedestrian-oriented development isn't only about making it easier to walk around cities; it's about designing cities that give a higher quality of life to all residents.

Methods

This research includes qualitative measures, which helped to provide a comprehensive understanding of tools and policies that North Dallas planners implement to transform suburban downtowns to be more pedestrian-oriented. I picked three cities within the North Dallas suburbs, I wanted each of the cities to have three different types of current downtown activity, and for the city to currently have plans to change their respective downtowns. The three cities chosen are Allen, Frisco, and McKinney, Texas. Each is ranked on a scale at the beginning of the project to show perceived downtown activity based upon social media, council proceedings, and city websites.

To get firsthand perspectives from different people within my case studies, I decided to use interviews as my primary form of research. I interviewed three planners, one from each city, and all of the interviews were conducted through the Teams platform. Each interview lasted around an hour, where I asked each of them the same questions to see if there were deviations of thought between the three city planners. The questions that I asked can be found in Appendix B. Each interview was transcribed by teams, and checked by myself, then coded. Through these interviews, I was able to learn the perceptions of the city planners, learn the values and impacts of downtowns within the cities, and create a rapport with the planners in each city. I wanted to talk with people who are already knowledgeable about my topic because they were able to provide more current information and deeper insight into my project, especially as they were in the process of altering their downtown in some way.

Prior to the interviews being conducted, I looked through each of their comprehensive plans and downtown plans to figure out what questions would be the best use of the planners'

time. After the interviews, I transcribed each interview, printed them out, and used highlighters to code the three interviews together by looking at the similarities between the three. These similarities became the topics of the findings section, and the differences I found were discussed in the discussion. To address bias on my part, I made sure to have a standard question list for all cities and used a consistent order to reduce inconsistency across the three interviews. After completing initial coding, I met with my thesis committee to review the qualitative findings. Their feedback guided revisions that strengthened theme clarity and helped to mitigate bias associated with single-coder interpretation. After gaining the feedback from my committee, I updated my findings based on that discussion.

Findings

To start to better understand how suburban downtowns in North Texas are transitioning from car-centric to pedestrian-oriented environments, this section compares the policies, design tools, and planning strategies used in Allen, Frisco, and McKinney.

This project is based on three planner interviews and planning documents of Allen, Frisco, and McKinney. Due to this, the findings reflect the perspectives, professional and personal experiences of the individual planners, as well as framing and priorities within the comprehensive and downtown plans. While these sources have provided information on each of the cities' downtowns, they do not represent the views of everyone in the community. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted in a context-specific way, as the people interviewed represent the governments that they work for, and are thus limited to shared opinions.

The City of Allen is a suburban city located in northern Collin County and has experienced rapid growth over the past few decades. It is now a mid-sized suburban city with approximately 107,000 residents living in Allen. Allen's population is made up mostly of families, with a higher median household income and strong school enrollment. Allen has a small historic downtown core near its original rail area, which is still physically there but functionally extremely underutilized, especially compared to other newer commercial areas in other places within the city.

Frisco is a rapidly growing suburban city in northern Collin and Denton Counties, with approximately 246,000 residents. Frisco's population is generally affluent and family-oriented, with a high median household income and a significant concentration of children and teenagers. The median age in Frisco is relatively young, and daily life is structured heavily around driving and activities for kids. The city is a major destination regionally, with sports venues, corporate

headquarters, and more within the city's borders. Frisco also contains a historic downtown area near its rail corridor, which contrasts with the surrounding suburban development. The core downtown area has become a main focal point for reinvestment, and the efforts have been able to help create a more walkable and mixed-use environment within Frisco.

McKinney is a city also located in Collin County, and has grown steadily to a population of around 120,000 residents, while still retaining a strong connection to its history. McKinney's demographics show a wide range of income levels, housing types, and age groups. While the city also has a strong base of middle and upper income families, the historic downtown has supported a mix of renters, homeowners and smaller households. McKinney's downtown is anchored by a traditional courthouse square and street grid, and serves as a civic, cultural, and commercial center.

Each city represents a different stage in the development of downtown planning. Allen, as the downtown seeking activation, Frisco, as a city that is redefining its identity through rapid development and connectivity, and McKinney, which has an established historic downtown, and is looking to balance preservation and revitalization. Table 1 summarizes the key similarities and differences across all three case studies, information taken from each city's planning documents and the interviews I had with a Planner at each city.

Table 1. Comparison of Allen, Frisco, and McKinney Planning Approaches

Category	Allen	Frisco	McKinney
Planning Document	Downtown Allen Revitalization Plan (2022)	Downtown Master Plan Update (2018)	Town Center Study Initiative (2008)

Downtown Character / Vision	Quiet, small-scale core downtown. Not many businesses in downtown	Historic Rail District with distinct character and mixed-use infill	Historic, human-scaled town center, focused on preservation and mixed-use infill
Mobility / Connectivity	Prioritizes pedestrian and bike safety. Reconfiguring Main Street for wider sidewalks and slower speeds	Complete Streets Design. ‘Park once’ district, strong cycling and pedestrian linkages	Promotes pedestrian scaled blocks and rail corridor reuse. Integrates with TXDOT and DART
Parking Strategy	Performance-based parking program	Different options per street for short-term parking	Parking kept away from a building’s ‘public’ façade. Maintain and enhance surface lots
Downtown Parking Cost	Free	Free	Free
Land Use & Zoning	Downtown subdistricts created, zoning regulations made based on these subdistricts	Character Areas created to reflect development character	Create transitioning zones to encourage people into the downtown core
Design Strategies	Create clearer design requirements	Establish high-quality design standards for city that combines each Character Area together with the Rail District theme	Encourage infill, emphasizes a pedestrian orientation in the Historic Core

Public Engagement	Multiple engagement opportunities. Downtown Steering Committee.	Online survey to public, Stakeholder Interviews and Design Workshop Open House	Stakeholder input (5 committees)
Implementation Projects	Fire Engine House Redevelopment	Design District and Rail District	Investment and ongoing revitalization
Overall Insights from Interviews	Walkability lacking on Main Street, library and parks are active areas	Focused on connectivity between Rail District and Frisco Square, public realm design	Emphasized preservation, community events, and public-private cooperation for redevelopment

Overview

Although each of the downtowns shares the goal of improving walkability and drawing people into the downtown, each city differs in the maturity and approach of its planning efforts. Common themes look at how to reconfigure streets around pedestrian comfort, revising the current zoning codes to allow for mixed-use development, and prioritizing community engagement before implementing proposed changes. Each city is influenced by the context of the current development in downtown and the people who live in each city. The following paragraphs look at each category deeper, identifying where the cities align and where they diverge from each other when moving towards a pedestrian-oriented downtown.

Planning Documents

Each of the cities' planning documents reflects the stage of downtown development and gives a road map of the future. When looking into each of these documents, looking specifically

at ways that the plan talked about future development, and specifically related to pedestrian-oriented development, was helpful when looking into these tools. Allen's Downtown Revitalization Plan (2022) was community-led and produced through engagement of all kinds with people from all different backgrounds in Allen. It is the newest planning document, and currently serves as a visionary framework with steps and measurable actions for redevelopment as well as mobility improvements within the downtown. Frisco's Downtown Master Plan Update (2018) not only serves as a vision but as a business investment plan centered on creating a central identity of the Rail District. McKinney's Town Center Study Initiative (2008) is a relatively older plan, but most definitely not outdated. It is an early example of downtown reinvestment and focuses heavily on visioning, participation, and giving options rather than strict guidelines that the community must follow. All three plans illustrate the progression in time from conceptual redevelopment into the current policy-driven, implementable policies centered around urban design.

Downtown Character and Vision

Each of the city's downtown identities shapes the direction of planning. Planning is not a one-size-fits-all solution; a city cannot simply place any type of policy in place. Lots of engagement and research need to be done before a policy or planning mechanism is introduced into a community. Allen's downtown is currently relatively small and underdeveloped; however, it possesses strong community involvement and appreciation and has a large potential for reinvention. The City of Allen envisions a connected, mixed-use core that reactivates vacant land and creates a community destination that people in the community can be proud of. Frisco's downtown, also known as the Rail District, looks to blend its modern development with the historic fabric of the downtown. Its vision emphasizes authenticity, branding, and a walkable

urban center. In contrast, McKinney already has a well-established historic core, which is centered on its courthouse square. McKinney's focus is on maintaining the human-scale while still being able to accommodate new infill in the process. While Allen and Frisco are looking to create a sense of place in their downtown, McKinney's strategy is to preserve and carefully strengthen one that already exists.

Mobility and Connectivity

From all the interviews and city documents, each city recognizes mobility and connectivity as an essential tool to achieving walkability and putting people before cars. Allen's plan calls for reconfiguring Main Street to prioritize pedestrians and cyclists by changing the street design to widen the sidewalks, add street trees, and slow vehicle speeds. Frisco also integrates bicycle and pedestrian connections to connect the Frisco Square, Rail District, and the surrounding neighborhoods. Frisco takes it a step further through a complete streets model and the park-once district that allows visitors of the area to leave their cars and be able to walk to multiple destinations. McKinney's approach focuses much more on maintaining its pedestrian-scaled blocks, promoting the rail corridor reuse, and looking for ways to coordinate with TxDOT and DART for long-term multimodal support and collaboration.

Parking Strategy and Cost

Parking management is extremely important in any downtown and reflects how each city can balance car accessibility with pedestrians. From the interviews with all three cities, a big commonality was the notion that if there is no parking, people will not come. It is important to balance the parking needs of a downtown with the pedestrian and design elements that are necessary in a downtown. All three cities provide free parking, recognizing that eliminating parking could harm small businesses within the suburban context of their cities. However, the

management tools of their parking differ. Allen has introduced a performance-based parking program that tailors the supply to land use needs, which has helped them transition away from the strict minimums that most cities are used to. Frisco regulates parking duration by street type and encourages turnover in high-activity areas while keeping the longer-term parking on the outskirts of the downtown area. McKinney keeps their parking out of view of pedestrians by keeping parking behind buildings and away from the facades of buildings. All three cities are looking at parking as shared and conscious of the design rather than car-dominant to prioritize the pedestrian realm.

Land Use and Zoning

Zoning reform is a central policy that all three downtowns utilize. Through a lot of public engagement, Allen was able to create new downtown subdistricts with corresponding design regulations that help to encourage vertical mixed-use development and active first-floor spaces, while still having a gradual separation between the single-family residential areas nearby. Frisco was similar to Allen and introduced ‘Character Areas’ that control the development pattern for each neighborhood downtown while still maintaining the Rail District identity. McKinney’s zoning is older than the newer models look at traditional zones that guide density toward the downtown area core, gradually getting less dense the further one goes from that core. All three communities show a shift from Euclidean zoning into a more form-based or context-sensitive design that helps to enable the pedestrian-oriented development the cities are after.

Design Strategies

Design tools are the first thing that someone notices when they enter into a new space and are a visual cue to each of the city’s planning goals. Allen’s plan looks to try to establish clearer design requirements, including street activation, public art, and façade treatments. Frisco’s design

strategy is much more detailed as the city wants the downtown to reflect the branding of the Rail District, so the city has implemented strict design standards for each of the respective Character Areas. McKinney's focus is looking at encouraging infill that respects the history of the area through scale and materials, ensuring that new buildings still fit within the established pattern of the square.

Public Engagement

Each planning process had extensive public input, though the scale and structure varied between cities. Allen's was highly interactive and featured online surveys, idea walls, and pop-up events at many different places, including the local high school and middle schools, senior center, and city events. Frisco's process engaged specifically with stakeholders through workshops, surveys, and business outreach, which resulted in a consensus for improved connectivity and more public gathering spaces. McKinney's engagement was innovative for its time in the early 2000s, but much less extensive than the other two. McKinney coordinated engagement through workshops and committees at that time.

Implementation Projects

Implementation reveals how each city can understand the plan they have created and the goals that go with it. Allen's redevelopment of the historic fire station into a dining destination signals reinvestment in the downtown core. A sketch of the fire station dining destination was included in the plan and creating it shortly after the plan was implemented shows the community that Allen is serious about following this plan. Frisco's 4th Street Plaza and Design District represent a large-scale partnership between private and public entities. This partnership was able to integrate open space, retail, and housing into a connected pedestrian framework. McKinney's

strategy is less project-based and more incremental, focusing on investment in infrastructure over a long period of time, façade programs, and partnerships to better the downtown area.

Interview Insights

Interviews with city planners reinforced many of the themes found within the plans. In Allen, Marc highlighted the lack of walkability on Main Street and the need for a project to activate the public space. John, from Frisco, emphasized the importance of connectivity between the Rail District and Frisco Square, as well as a cohesive experience for everyone. Hayley in McKinney talked about the balance between preservation, community events, and partnerships to create sustainable revitalization. All three planners recognized that pedestrian facilities downtown are not a matter of infrastructure, but culture, identity, and public opinion heavily play into whether a project is successful or not.

Public Health

When asked about how each city was looking into public health as a benefit for pedestrian-oriented development, none of the cities were exploring the benefit of public health. All were interested in the research and wanted to learn more about the topic; however, since it is not a priority to most of their own community members, they had not thought about looking into it. There is an overall sense of importance when it comes to public health, but not much thought is currently about how planning affects our health in our communities in North Dallas.

Summary of Findings

These findings reveal that Allen, Frisco, and McKinney are all navigating a challenge- how to create walkable spaces, not by taking away the cars, but working with them to create community-centered downtowns. While each of them is on a different path, they all demonstrate a movement regionally toward a people-first planning approach. Shared tools like zoning

overlays, shared parking, and street design point to collaboration within the planning space, even when each of the city's contexts differs. Ultimately, the findings point to not getting rid of the cars, but prioritizing pedestrian-oriented development to further the experience for people in each of the downtown areas.

Discussion

Introduction

All across Allen, Frisco, and McKinney, planners are rethinking what suburban downtowns could become. While each city has approached revitalization differently, several themes have emerged surrounding mobility, pedestrian-oriented development, and some of the difficulties between a car-dependent culture and a growing interest in creating spaces and streets that prioritize people. The discussion below looks at the findings through the lens of my research question- What policies and tools help suburban North Texas cities transition toward pedestrian-oriented downtowns? By collecting all my information, this section looks at both the progress being made as well as the gaps that remain while these communities work toward more walkable and healthy downtowns.

Planning Documents

Allen, Frisco, and McKinney each approach their planning work with different levels of implementation and actions. It is important to note that each of the three plans were created by a private company, with Stantec helping to develop Allen's, Gateway Planning Group worked on the City of Frisco's, and The City of McKinney had a group of people working on it, with the Gateway Planning Group taking lead, HNTB Corporation, Mesa Design Group, and Civic Design Associates played roles in the plan as well. All of the cities had outside planning professionals coming in to help with the plan, and the Gateway Planning Group was a key contributor in both the City of Frisco and the City of McKinney. Allen's Downtown Revitalization Plan (2022) is the newest of the three plans and is extremely community-driven; however, right now, it is mostly a 'wish list' for what the residents aspire for Allen to be. The

plan outlines a lot about what residents really want: a more active and walkable community downtown; however, the plan will take quite a while to take effect, as it has a lot of visionary actions rather than steps to implementation. Frisco's 2018 Downtown Master Plan reflects a more advanced stage of planning, with more detailed street design, new development, and implementation strategies that are already in motion- including the Main Street reconstruction and the Rail District identity of the area. McKinney has the longest history when it comes to the downtown plan, the 2008 Town Center Study, and the adoption of their form-based code. These have helped to guide McKinney to steady improvements in the downtown. Together, these plans show three cities at different levels shifting toward more pedestrian-oriented development.

Planning Document Best Practices

Across these three cities, McKinney and Frisco demonstrate several best practices that align quite well with the national guidance on implementing successful walkable downtowns. McKinney has a lot of consistency across their documents, with the Town Center Study, form-based codes, and tax increment reinvestment zone (TIRZ) connecting to some of the recommendations by Cervero and Radisch (1996), which emphasize the importance of regulatory alignment in shaping environments for pedestrians. Frisco has a focus on a connected street grid and public area improvements that connect to some of the principles outlined by the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO, 2013), especially regarding slowing traffic to allow for more pedestrian activity. The best planning documents also need to incorporate a financial strategy, mobility design, and a framework for placemaking, which all work together. This best aligns with Ewing and Bartholomew's (2013) guidance that walkable places require many combinations of policies, design, and development standards. These

practices can help to show how these planning documents can allow for long-term transformation in different communities.

Planning Document Future Recommendations

Moving forward, Allen needs to make its vision concrete by adopting regulatory updates like form-based codes or overlay districts to ensure there is consistency between the revitalization plan and the action that will be taken in the future. Form-based codes prioritize the physical pedestrian experience, which increases the likelihood that the outcome reflects the vision Allen has created (Parolek et al., 2008). Frisco should continue working on mobility improvements while updating some of the land-use areas to show the Rail District identity as more of a priority. Aligning land use with mobility improvements is important for reinforcing the identity of a place and supporting pedestrian-oriented development (Cervero & Kockelman, 1997). McKinney could use an update of their document to better compete with the nearby cities. Plan updates allow cities to better respond to current conditions, and makes sure that cities are strategically focused (Berke & Godschalk, 2009). Overall, North Texas Cities should think about creating planning documents that have actionable policies where the community can tell whether they have been done. When there is consistency between city planning, communities can more easily transition into pedestrian-oriented downtowns.

People First, Cars Second

Each city is currently making progress toward prioritizing people over cars, but they are each doing it in different ways. Right now, Frisco is showing the biggest shift by redesigning Main Street to include wider sidewalks, trees for shade, pedestrian lighting, and lowering traffic speeds. McKinney already has a strong pedestrian area around its downtown square due to the

plan implementation, much before cities were even thinking about pedestrianization. The current focus in McKinney is all about reconnecting the east and west sides of downtown through major projects like the SH-5 improvements and deck park – in the proposal phase currently. Allen’s revitalization plan is mostly conceptual since the plan is the most recent. However, construction on the Firehouse Dining Area is starting to take place, with the area prioritizing walkability, connecting trails to downtown, and making it easy to park and walk to nearby businesses. In all of my interviews, all three planners said the same thing: the cities do not want to get rid of car use altogether; that is simply impossible at the current time. What the cities do want to do is they want to make sure that people can have ample areas to walk around, and space to park since most people who visit the downtown need to be able to access it with a car. All three of the cities are starting to look into the pedestrian experience, but all of their implementation timelines and strategies differ significantly.

People First, Cars Second Best Practices

Across the U.S., best practices emphasize that successful pedestrian-oriented downtowns need to visually show that the area is built for people (Speck, 2012). Frisco’s Main Street redesign shows this by allocating some roadway space to sidewalks and amenities for pedestrians, which also reflect the Complete Streets Principles endorsed by the U.S. DOT (2015). McKinney’s approach of focusing on highway crossings and connections aligns with the recommendations from Hunter et al. (2010), which argues that for networks to be walkable, we must eliminate major physical barriers. The people who live in Allen showed their desire for walkability within the downtown area, which reflects research showing that resident support can be a very important factor when shifting away from car-centric cultures (Freishtat & Yin, 2018).

People First, Cars Second Future Recommendations

Allen should prioritize implementing people-first improvements quickly, even if it is simply through temporary projects, to begin shifting community perceptions and gaining momentum. Incremental interventions have shown to help communities understand street redesign, and reduces resistance, and builds support for long-term change within the community (Lydon & Garcia, 2015). Frisco should continue to narrow roads in certain areas that are shown to be beneficial for pedestrians and add more pedestrian crossings throughout the Rail District to continue reinforcing the identity as an area for pedestrians. Lane reductions and enhanced crossing infrastructure improve pedestrian safety and reduce vehicle speeds (Ewing & Dumbaugh, 2009). McKinney could also expand its pedestrian focus by continuing to create additional public spaces and amenities in key areas outside of the immediate square. Accessible public spaces within walking distance to residential areas are associated with higher levels of routine physical activity as well as social activity (Heath et al., 2006). Regionally, North Dallas cities need to adopt people-first mindsets in designing streets instead of treating pedestrian improvements as a last-minute thought. Shifting from car-centric planning to pedestrian-oriented planning will require allocating space, updating standards, and emphasizing public realm improvements at the core of downtowns.

Parking Policies

Parking widely shapes the downtown experience across all three cities, and each city handles parking differently. McKinney regularly conducts downtown parking studies in order to make decisions based on utilization of the parking, which helps to manage the demands of visitors, employees, and residents. McKinney also has development standards that restrict the location of parking, making sure that the building facades are prioritized, with parking going in

the back. Currently, the parking downtown is not enough for the demand that the City of McKinney is experiencing, and many times, when people cannot find a parking spot, they leave. Frisco is actively transitioning towards a more district-based parking system by adding parking structures that are shared between multiple businesses. They are also removing some on-street parking to widen sidewalks, as well as adding signage to encourage a “park-once” system. Allen’s planning documents show us that parking minimums and large surface lots are currently hurting the pedestrian experience, but many of the businesses rely on these parking lots, and as a result, Allen’s parking system has not improved much since plan implementation. Parking is a very clear benchmark of where each city falls along the transition between car-centric to pedestrian-oriented downtowns.

Parking Policies Best Practices

Right-sizing or removing parking minimums can support walkability and small businesses by freeing land for development while reducing unnecessary trips by car (Shoup, 2018). Frisco’s shared parking strategy aligns with the Urban Land Institute’s recommendations to manage parking at the district level as opposed to parcel-by-parcel (ULI, 2016). McKinney’s approach is data-driven and is also a best practice, as other cities have also successfully used performance-based parking programs to balance the supply and demand in downtowns (FHWA, 2012). Allen’s recognition of parking challenges shows what research suggests: outdated parking requirements can prevent redevelopment and harm local businesses (Nolon & Bacher, 2020). When implemented well, parking policies can become a powerful tool for shaping downtowns.

Parking Policies Future Recommendations

Allen should start to modernize its parking standards by reducing or eliminating the parking minimums. Reducing or eliminating parking minimum requirements has been associated with more compact development patterns and better pedestrian environments (Shoup, 2018). Frisco should continue to link parking structures with pedestrian improvements and ensure that garages are paired with strong wayfinding and safe walking routes. Structured parking should come with high-quality pedestrian infrastructure to further support the ‘park-once’ experience that Frisco is looking for (Speck, 2012). McKinney should think about either adding additional parking spaces in strategic areas or implementing pricing strategies or employee parking programs to maintain turnover, especially as downtown continues to grow. Pricing mechanisms have been identified as effective tools for improving parking turnover and maximizing the existing lots, without having to expand the overall footprint of parking (Shoop, 2018). Across North Dallas, cities should begin to shift away from requiring excess parking and instead use parking policy to support walkability, infill development, and a park-once culture. Continuously completing parking studies in downtown areas can also help to find the strengths and shortcomings of the current parking system.

Economic Incentives

Economic Incentives play a pivotal role in how a city is able to fund its projects. At the end of the day, without money, there is no way for a city to function or allow projects to continue. In McKinney, the Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ) has helped to fund public infrastructure improvements, building revitalizations, and streetscape improvements, which have all helped to contribute to the success of the McKinney downtown area. Frisco uses the market-driven approach, allowing public-private partnerships to attract projects like the Design District

and 4th Street Plaza. Allen is currently in the early stages of using economic tools, and the Allen Economic Development Corporation has purchased a few properties in the downtown to help guide future development. While each city uses incentives differently, all three understand that pedestrian-oriented development can only be realized through economic development.

Economic Incentives Best Practices

Lang emphasizes that incentives should be given for outcomes that can help support pedestrian-oriented development, like mixed-use infill, adaptive reuse, and helping small businesses to thrive (Lang, 2017). McKinney's use of TIRZ funding reflects other examples across the nation where tax increment financing was implemented to help support walkable downtown development, like Denver's Union Station district (Denver Union Station, 2014). Frisco's focus on capturing local spending power aligns with studies that show walkable environments increase the revenue of retailers and empower the local economy (Volker & Handy, 2020). Allen's strategy encourages an active role in redevelopment and focuses on allowing the community a choice in how their downtown is shaped. These practices illustrate how economic incentives can create conditions to allow for walkable, safe, and vibrant downtown areas.

Economic Incentives Future Recommendations

In the future, Allen could create incentive programs to target small local businesses, particularly through tenant-improvement grants, new façade programs, or easing costs for creating new small businesses downtown. Literature on economic development suggests that having small businesses is more likely to circulate revenue inside the economy and helps to contribute to a stronger place-based identity rather than local chains (Shuman, 2006). Frisco can

strengthen how they use their tax by ensuring that there are plenty of mixed-income residential options available to accompany new retail and entertainment uses. Mixed-income housing supports economic resilience, reduces homelessness, and helps sustain the local economy by ensuring a stable customer base downtown (Zuk et al, 2018). McKinney could expand its tools economically to include some equity-focused programs to help residents and entrepreneurs who may need them. Equity-oriented economic strategies are critical to prevent uneven revitalization outcomes and help to ensure that long-term residents can benefit from downtown investment (Fainstein, 2010). Overall, North Dallas Suburbs should shift from attracting national chains to creating incentives for local businesses to thrive, support placemaking, and encourage revitalization that all can contribute to a more walkable downtown environment.

Placemaking

All three cities want to make their downtown a destination where people who live near and farther away will want to make an effort to participate in. McKinney's historic square already actively serves as a regional destination with frequent events, festivals, and activities supported by its urban form and businesses nearby. Frisco is currently building its identity through the brand of the Rail District through public art installations, designing the 4th Street Plaza, and adding lighting and pedestrian improvements, all aiming to bring people together. Allen's revitalization plans to add multiple placemaking elements, including Cottonwood Creek Park, a downtown plaza, and more extensive arts programs, but these have yet to be implemented. Altogether, these cities are at different levels of maturity in the process of placemaking.

Placemaking Best Practices

The best placemaking aligns the urban form, programming, and community identity, echoing the principles from Project for Public Spaces (PPS, 2019). Frisco's alley activation and plaza design show how small interventions can create memorable public spaces, which Project for Public Spaces finds that flexible, people-centered spaces contribute to more foot traffic (PPS, 2019). McKinney's long-term preservation and the current activation of their square connect to the literature emphasizing the importance of historic character in creating authentic places (Nolon & Bacher, 2020). Allen's strong community involvement in envisioning public spaces contributes to the idea that community-driven design enhances the long-term support for projects within a community. Effective placemaking relies on both physical improvements as well as community participation and events, which draw people into a space.

Placemaking Future Recommendations

Allen should start to prioritize quick placemaking projects, like pop-up plazas, parklets, art installations, or monthly events, to get people back in downtown to establish a sense of identity for residents prior to the construction phase. Short-term and low-cost interventions are recognized as effective tools for testing ideas, building support for the community, and activating spaces before permanent investments can be made. These strategies can reduce risk while at the same time showing how public improvements can support walkability, social, and physical health (Lydon & Garcia, 2015). Frisco can also implement more small-scale improvements and more events to strengthen the Rail District identity. Consistent programming and visible, human-scale enhancements help contribute to stronger community attachment and increased activity downtown (Lewicka, 2011). To make sure that the placemaking efforts are inclusive and connected, McKinney should expand their efforts to the east of downtown. Expanding

investments across the downtown area helps to ensure that benefits are distributed equitably and that all of the improvements support more of the residents (Fainstein, 2010). All across North Dallas, cities should invest in human-scale design, temporary catalyst projects, art, and local culture to create destinations that feel unique from one another.

Community Engagement

The scale of each of the cities engagement differs widely, but each city used some form of community engagement to its advantage. Allen's Downtown Revitalization Plan is, of the three, the most community-driven effort. With workshops, online surveys, outreach to schools, and stakeholder meetings, which all guided every stage of the vision. Frisco used design charrettes, surveys, and open houses during the master plan update and integrated feedback into the street designs and public space concepts. McKinney has used community engagement since the early 2000s, but the Town Center Study involved much less engagement than what we are used to currently. The Town Center Study used stakeholder meetings to be the primary means of engagement, and the city currently employs more engagement principles in more updated plans and projects. Each city used community engagement to guide its plans and future projects, but the depth to which the engagement is used differs between each city.

Community Engagement Best Practices

Engagement needs to be authentic, inclusive, and collected without bias to be considered good public engagement (Pennsylvania State University, 2019). Allen's engagement process aligns well with this and reflects that participatory planning leads to more community buy-in and more long-term success, especially allowing meetings to be civil, since everyone is already on board with the projects and proposals. Frisco's use of online surveys and interactive methods of

communication emphasizes a modern approach that combines traditional and digital tools to capture community members who might want to be involved but do not have the time or ability to go to a public meeting. McKinney's practice of public design workshops allows for early and continuous engagement that can support transformation more easily since people understand what development is occurring. These practices show that good engagement can help shift public perception, especially on issues that are most important to the community. Engagement can also show the community that the city has nothing to hide and allow for everyone's voice to be heard.

Community Engagement Future Recommendations

Community engagement should be a central part of planning downtown efforts in all three cities; each city has different opportunities to strengthen its approach to do this. Allen should continue the momentum they currently have from their engagement process by creating a long-term advisory group to guide implementation. Frisco could deepen their engagement with students, renters, and underrepresented groups, especially as redevelopment keeps moving quickly. Lastly, McKinney should expand their engagement efforts with any future projects to ensure that everyone is happy with the outcomes of development in their city. All across the North Dallas area, cities should move beyond traditional meetings or stakeholder events and incorporate pop-ups, youth engagement, and materials that are easily accessible to ensure that all of the community is represented in the downtown decision-making. Inclusive engagement not only strengthens the decision-making of cities and public opinion, but it also has the ability to reflect the lived experiences of the whole community rather than simply a small portion of the community.

Public Health Recommendations

Public health is currently not prioritized or thought about in any of the cities' planning documents or daily projects; however, there are health benefits that are a byproduct of the pedestrian-oriented projects. All three cities prioritize safety improvements by slowing down traffic, making intersections easier to cross, and encouraging recreation through trails, parks, and public spaces. This is reducing injury risk and bettering the physical and mental health of the community, even if not explicitly stated in city plans, interviews, or documents.

Public health is extremely important to planning because the built environment directly shapes how people move, eat, and experience their lives. When communities are planned with safe sidewalks, connected trails and parks, and accessible places to go, they make physical health and activity a normal part of the routine, instead of something that takes extra time and resources. Planning decisions about land use, street design, and transportation can either help to encourage walking and biking or reinforce car-dependent patterns that overall hurt public health. When cities prioritize public health within planning, they are not only designing places, but they are shaping them long-term to promote their citizens' health and quality of life.

One recommendation found from this research is the need for more intentional interactions between public health and planning in the broader North Dallas region. While physical health outcomes like walkability, access to parks, and street safety are usually discussed in planning documents, it has been found that they are not usually framed as public health benefits or actions. By hosting regional workshops for municipal and private planners to learn about public health best practices and how to implement them at the city scale, this could help planners understand the importance of public health and how to incorporate it into their own cities. With this knowledge, the planners who participate can then share it with their City

Councils and Planning and Zoning Commissions to help them understand the importance of these benefits and work with the planners to implement more projects that yield public health benefits. By building knowledge for both the staff and elected officials, public health considerations can become more embedded in planning decisions, rather than treated as secondary benefits of a project.

Integrating public health considerations directly into planning, through Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) or built-environment metrics, could be helpful (Cervero et al., 2009). Research by Volker and Handy shows that walkable environments directly connect to lower chronic disease rates as well as improved environmental health (Volker & Handy, 2020). Studies also show that traffic calming, lighting, and pedestrian infrastructure help to reduce injury risks and encourage walking more frequently (Carson et al., 2023). Many cities have incorporated health frameworks into their plans, which shows that public health can strengthen policy support for pedestrian-oriented development; however, the culture in North Dallas doesn't always prioritize public health.

North Dallas Culture

North Dallas culture plays a huge role in shaping how suburban communities approach pedestrian-oriented development. Across Allen, Frisco, and McKinney, residents prioritize convenience, safety, and personal comfort, which are values that usually align with car dependency rather than walkability (Freishtat & Yin, 2022). Driving is seen as the default travel mode, with very few options otherwise, it is also seen as a symbol of independence and security which makes it very difficult for people to imagine shifting towards denser, pedestrian-focused environments, even downtown. Many people enjoy walkable destinations in the area like Legacy West, The Star, Watters Creek, or the McKinney Square, but they often prefer to drive to these

walkable areas rather than support strategies to make their neighborhoods less car centric. They prefer to park somewhere close to their destination, and if parking is not available or they perceive parking as unavailable, residents and visitors may choose to cancel the trip to prevent having to walk farther to their destination.

Within the culture of North Dallas, most of the time, public health is not a primary motivator for planning decisions. Improvements to walking, biking, or public spaces are usually supported by the economic or aesthetic benefit rather than the impact on public health. As a result, even though pedestrian-oriented development can improve physical and mental health significantly, these benefits are usually overlooked by expectations that prioritize driving and quick access to their amenities. This cultural preference of North Dallas is a large barrier for North Dallas cities attempting to shift towards walkable, people-first downtowns.

Limitations

This research has several limitations that have shaped the scope and depth of the findings and discussion. Firstly, the study focused on three North Dallas cities, Allen, Frisco, and McKinney, which provided insight that was meaningful but limited the ability to be able to generalize the results for the whole region. While these three cities offer valuable examples of different approaches to downtown pedestrianization, they are only a small portion of the North Dallas region. The three cities chosen also have very little to no public transit, while some of the other cities nearby have rapid transportation systems already put into place. If some of these cities were chosen, the findings and recommendations would have most likely changed. Including more cities within the area would have given a wider range of tools, development patterns, and attitudes toward pedestrian-oriented planning.

A second limitation that I have found is the reliance on planning documents and a small number of planner interviews. These sources were chosen to reflect official and professional perspectives within each city, but do not fully encapsulate how residents, small business owners, or everyday users experience these different downtowns. The number of interviews heavily reflects the problem of data saturation within my project. Community perceptions, especially around issues like safety, density, or convenience, play a large role in walkability outcomes, yet these were not measured in this project, and could be extremely helpful to introduce new themes or something that would not have been thought about previously. As a result of the data saturation, the findings reflect what the three city planners believe to be true, but cannot be fully confirmed as truth that the whole community feels is right. Future research should incorporate more voices within the community through surveys, public interviews, or methods like pedestrian counts or behavior mapping.

Finally, there were timing and implementation gaps across all three cities. I chose the three cities that I did partially because they were all currently working on their downtowns; however, I did not consider how the different timelines would affect my research. Particularly in Allen, most of the projects that Allen is working on are in very early stages of planning and design, and will most likely not start construction for a few months to years. Revisiting these three case studies after major projects are complete could allow for a more accurate assessment of pedestrian-oriented strategies in practice.

Areas for Future Research

Building upon these limitations, there are some opportunities for future research that could help the planning field, specifically related to pedestrian-oriented development in North Dallas. Expanding the study to include more cities with different transportation options, like

cities served by DART or other bus systems, could allow for stronger comparisons across other cities. Adding in data methods that would collect community data or opinions could also give more opportunities for deeper research. By increasing the number of cities and data available, this research could be transformed into a deeper dive, looking at North Texas downtowns.

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Appendix A – IRB Proposal Approval



Office of Research Integrity,
Compliance and Security

TO: Huston Gibson
Landscape Archit & Comm Plan
Manhattan, KS 66506

Proposal Number: IRB-12989

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 06/30/2025

RE: Proposal Entitled, "Regional and Community Planning Master's Report."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects / Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Kansas State University has reviewed the proposal identified above and has determined that it is EXEMPT from further IRB review. This exemption applies only to the proposal - as written - and currently on file with the IRB. Any change potentially affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation and may disqualify the proposal from exemption.

Based upon information provided to the IRB, this activity is exempt under the criteria set forth in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, **45 CFR §104(d), category: Exempt Category 2 Subsection ii.**

Certain research is exempt from the requirements of HHS/OHRP regulations. A determination that research is exempt does not imply that investigators have no ethical responsibilities to subjects in such research; it means only that the regulatory requirements related to IRB review, informed consent, and assurance of compliance do not apply to the research.

Any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, the University Research Compliance Office, and if the subjects are KSU students, to the Director of the Student Health Center.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 06/30/2025 4:56 PM ET

Appendix B – IRB Interview Guide

Opening

Who am I

Research Question- What policies and tools do planners implement to move from car-centric suburban downtowns to pedestrian-oriented downtowns in North Texas?

How they can help me

Do I have your permission to take notes during this interview or record to use them to help me with my Thesis project?

Section 1: Background

- Can you tell me a little bit about your role in your city's planning or development efforts?
- How would you describe the current state of your city's downtown in terms of pedestrian activity and infrastructure?
- Are you looking to reduce car dependence in your downtown?
 - o What are the main challenges you face in reducing car dependence downtown?
 - o OR
 - o What are the reasons your city is not interested or thinking about reducing car dependence?

Section 2: Policies/Tools/Planning Approaches

- What specific policies or planning tools has your city implemented to encourage a shift toward pedestrian-oriented development?
 - o Ask about specific policies in city plans (has it been implemented into the ordinances? Why or Why not?)
- Have zoning changes, overlay districts, or form-based codes played a role in shifting to pedestrian-oriented development?
- How are Complete Streets principles used in your planning process, if at all?
 - o Refer to specific ideas in city plans
- How does your city balance parking with the desire for walkable spaces?
- After creating your comprehensive plan, bike/ped plan or parks plan, were any of the policy recommendations implemented? If so, how did your city decide what to implement and what to not?

Section 3: Public Health & Walkability

- How much consideration is given to public health benefits (physical activity/air quality), when planning downtown improvements?
- Have you partnered with public health departments or agencies on any related initiatives?

- What pedestrian safety strategies have been implemented (e.g., lighting, crosswalks, traffic calming) and have you seen increase in people actively walking around the area due to these changes?
- How do you ensure inclusivity for older adults, children, or people with disabilities in walkable downtown design?

Section 4: Community & Political Landscape

- Are your residents and government entities interested in being able to walk around downtown spaces for the physical health aspect? Or another aspect?
- Do you think that people in North Dallas value their physical health as a benefit of walkable downtowns?
 - What other factors are more important than physical health to the North Dallas community?
- Have you found resistance or strong support from residents, business owners, or elected officials with reducing car dependency?
 - How do these conversations usually go?
- What community engagement strategies have been most helpful in shaping or justifying pedestrian improvements over road/car-focused improvements?

Section 5: Funding & Partnerships

- What funding mechanisms or grants have been used to support walkability or streetscape projects?
 - Is your city looking for more ways to increase pedestrian connectivity/ walkability/ pedestrian-oriented development?
 - Have you collaborated with regional agencies, consultants, or private developers to advance these goals?

Section 6: Evaluation & Outcomes

- How does your city assess the success of pedestrian improvements downtown?
- Have you used walkability scores, traffic counts, or public health metrics to evaluate progress of pedestrian-oriented development within your city?

Section 7: Next Steps

- What policies / tools do you think were most vital to your city / will be most vital to your city to increase pedestrian-oriented development in downtown?
- What advice would you offer to other planners trying to make similar transitions in car dependent suburban contexts, especially here in Texas?