

Living Streets Aotearoa



Living Streets Aotearoa
PO Box 25-424 Panama Street,
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Hon Nick Smith
Minister for the Environment

Hon Simon Bridges
Minister of Transport

Hon Dr Jonathan Coleman
Minister of Health

Dear Ministers

I was surprised to hear Minister Smith in a recent statement on housing, citing footpaths on both sides of a road as an unnecessary cost that is reducing housing affordability. While we strongly agree that reducing infrastructure costs is important, a subdivision with one footpath is a poorly designed subdivision. A housing area should either have two footpaths that fully perform their intended function, or a shared street space with no footpaths. An inadequate footpath is worse than no footpath at all and therefore a true waste of infrastructure money.

I recently attended Walk21 in Sydney – the international conference for experts and advocates concerned about walking. Papers presented at that conference provided evidence from a number of countries that demonstrated that walkable neighbourhoods are good for the economy, and that creating adequate walking infrastructure is affordable if the right approach to street design is taken, and that overall infrastructure costs in walkable, dense neighbourhoods are far lower.

Walkable neighbourhoods have been shown in a number of studies to have higher market value than houses in the low density cul-de-sac suburbs that are still favoured by many NZ developers. Higher market value tells us that these are the sort of developments where people want to live. “Walkable” scoring systems look at issues such as how close services are to where people live (a product of a combination of mixed landuses and higher density), how easy it is to move around on foot, and how good public transport provision is.

One international scoring system being used in marketing of real estate through the internet in the US is freely available on walkscore.com.

The sort of dense, well designed neighbourhoods that score well on walkability scores are also efficient in infrastructure terms. Low density suburbs are costly in terms of the cost per resident of both fixed infrastructure (e.g. pipes, roads, footpaths) and services (e.g. rubbish collection). The costs can be so high that some shrinking cities in the US are actively closing down outer suburbs because they can't afford to service them. In high density suburbs, a wider range of services can be provided within walking distance of the residents, including public open space, social services, and libraries.

Businesses are also more likely to be set up. For example one entrepreneur recently calculated that he needed to sell 200 cups of coffee a day to make a living from a coffee cart – easy to achieve in a dense neighbourhood and impossible in a sprawling outer suburb.

Walkable neighbourhoods encourage exercise. Inactivity was characterised by many participants at the conference as the new tobacco – a major threat to public health, linked to a wide range of diseases including cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, some cancers and dementia. A large proportion of the attendees at the conference were from the health sector, including private insurance companies, health agencies and health researchers, and they reported on a wide range of initiatives to increase daily exercise in order to minimise health costs. A key note address at Walk21 was given by Tyler Norris, Vice President of Total Health at Kaiser Permanente – the biggest US health insurer. They have built encouragement of exercise into all their programmes, in order to reduce the health problems of their members.

<http://www.walk21sydney.net/assets/Uploads/presentations/walk21sydney2014/Tuesday%2021st%20October%202014/2.%20Keynotes/Tyler%20Norris%20Walk%2021%20Keynote%20Handout%20pdf.pdf>

The Australian Heart Foundation released a discussion document at the conference, on the importance of density in creating walkable neighbourhoods.

http://www.heartfoundation.org.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/Heart_Foundation_%20Does_density_matter_FINAL2014.pdf

Other papers looked at how the state of the walking environment (condition of footpaths, ability to cross roads, presence of hazards) affects willingness to walk and road safety. For example evidence was presented showing that the willingness of elderly and other vulnerable groups to walk depended on how safe they felt, which was strongly related to walking infrastructure. Poor footpaths can be a major safety risk (e.g. causing falls that result in broken bones), as ACC's research has shown. Where vulnerable people feel unable to walk, they are more likely to become socially isolated, and lose access to key services. It is also a downward spiral – less load bearing exercise resulting in reduced muscle strength, resulting in a greater risk of falls, and therefore a reduced willingness to walk and a greater vulnerability to uneven footpath surfaces, and less activity.

The papers and a pre-conference workshop also emphasised that the traditional footpath, kerb, road arrangement isn't always necessary or desirable. Shared streets – i.e. a single street surface used by pedestrians, cars and cyclists – can be a desirable arrangement in areas with low traffic volumes and speed. Shared streets are more flexible in their use – it is easier to use them for events, and easier to adjust the arrangements of street furniture and uses to fit with adjacent landuses (e.g. to allow cafe tables to spill out onto the street). Where the street is narrow, removal of footpaths gives more space for manoeuvring vehicles (e.g. in narrow inner city lanes in Wellington that are used by delivery vehicles).

Kerbs and gutters are also being replaced in many cities by alternative and more effective stormwater systems, using gardens to collect and process the water, as part of water sensitive urban design initiatives. Those stormwater treatment gardens can become useful amenity features, improving the environment for pedestrians and adjacent businesses, and slowing traffic.

I attended a workshop in Parramatta, where the council has been turning lanes with narrow inadequate footpaths into shared spaces, as a way to encourage the establishment of small businesses, improve pedestrian movements through the town, and improve pedestrian service levels.

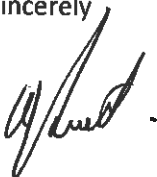
In low density housing areas, shared streets remove the need for building footpaths, allow a smaller overall road footprint, and slow traffic. It is also vital that these suburbs have a grid street pattern (at least from a pedestrian perspective), rather than a cul-de-sac design without pedestrian connections, that reduce the potential catchment area for businesses such as dairies and for bus stops.

In high density housing areas, shared spaces used by large numbers of pedestrians while providing access for vehicles (e.g. residents entering parking spaces under apartment blocks and service vehicles delivering goods to small shops), with high quality amenity features, will allow both infrastructure and open space needs to be delivered on one area of land. Quality high density mixed use neighbourhoods close to town centres or public transport nodes (e.g. railway stations) attract the highest market prices, and are also favoured by a lot of younger people just starting on the property ladder. If housing of that type is available at a reasonable price (achieved by having higher density and a mix of apartment sizes and qualities), those buying an apartment can also avoid the very high costs of transport that would be associated with a cheap house in a distant suburb. 30% of apartments in central Wellington are occupied by carless households. Being able to avoid owning a car can save \$5-10,000 per annum in household costs, allowing a mortgage to be more readily serviced.

Living Streets believes that we need affordable housing for all citizens. But just as no-one wants to have low cost housing that is unhealthy housing (e.g. with mould causing respiratory diseases), we do not wish to see people forced into suburbs where transport will be unaffordable, adequate infrastructure too expensive, and public health affected by obesogenic environments. For both public health and economic vibrancy reasons, we need cities that are walkable, compact, and well designed.

We would urge the Government to take steps in its health, transport and RMA reforms to promote high quality urban design, including encouragement of walkable neighbourhoods and higher density around major public transport nodes.

Yours sincerely



Andy Smith
President