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Walkable cities are newly desirable

Detroit 18th in national study

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ARLINGTON, Va. -- Caitlin Jones and her fiancé, Evan Oxfeld, grew up in suburbs where getting anywhere worth going required a car. When they started looking for a home together, they wanted something different: walkability.

Young professionals such as Jones and Oxfeld, both 24, are driving a national trend toward more walkable communities, said the author of a report released Tuesday by the Brookings Institution. The report ranks the Washington region first among major U.S. metropolitan areas in the number of walkable places per capita, thanks to changes over the past 15 years. Detroit ranked 18th.

Christopher Leinberger, a real estate developer and visiting fellow at Brookings, set out to quantify the trend by counting regional-serving walkable urban places in each of the 30 biggest U.S. metropolitan areas. Regional-serving means the place is not just a bedroom community, but has jobs, retail or cultural institutions that bring in people.

Leinberger, who also teaches urban planning at the University of Michigan, counted only places where significant subsidies are no longer required to spur development. He predicted many more -- such as downtown Detroit and Crossroads in Kansas City, Mo. -- would reach that point within the next decade. He counted 157 such walkable places; the survey did not take into account the size of each.

Leinberger attributed Washington's success with walkability to several factors, including a large population of twenty- and thirty-somethings and recent strong economic growth. But the chief factor, he said, is the success of the Metro. He called rail transit a key factor in the success of walkable places. About two-thirds of those counted are served by rail, he said.