

## Expert advises on making community 'livable'

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**The Holland Sentinel**

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Holland, MI — Livable communities promote economic growth, health and local pride. Disability Network Lakeshore hosted Chris Zimmerman Tuesday night to talk about how municipal planning of streets, housing and transit can create a livable community. Zimmerman is the Arlington (Virginia) County Board's vice chairman. He also represents Arlington on the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, and the region's metropolitan planning agency and other regional transportation bodies.

The Holland Sentinel chatted with Zimmerman before his speech.

### Define "livable" community.

It has a lot to do with walkability, Zimmerman said — "a place you don't have to get into your car to go everywhere and do everything. A large portion of the community can't drive and are dependent on someone else — people who are young, people who are old, people who have certain kinds of disabilities, people who don't have the income to have a car."

### How can you promote health through infrastructure design?

The United States' fight with obesity is closely related to the lack of walkability in its cities, Zimmerman said.

"No. 1 what do you need? You need the ability to walk," he said. Sidewalks, pedestrian street lights, bike paths, bike lanes, public transit, even keeping parking out of sight and planting trees to shade the sidewalks can help.

### What do you mean by transit-oriented development? Is that another term for walkable?

"Basically, people will walk a quarter mile to anything. Beyond a quarter mile, people's propensity to walk tends to drop off," Zimmerman said. Transit makes it possible to connect areas, if they're reasonably compact, once people arrive. "You've got to have a way to move a good chunk of people without bringing their automobiles," he said. "It has to be reliable and frequent."

### What about gathering points?

"When you look at successful communities or towns or cities — they are gathering places," he said. "It can't just be a destination. You can live in such places.... The fact that people are living there is part of what makes that viable."

### What can government do to encourage affordable housing and promote economic growth?

"There's an under-supply of these urban areas where people want to be able to go out and walk to a movie or walk to a coffee shop. ... Employers are finding this is where they want to be," he said. "If you channel some of the benefit into affordable housing, then you have a chance at a complete community."

In Arlington, developers are given incentives for providing affordable housing, including a revolving loan fund.

### How do these livable cities look compared to the cities we know today?

"It's the way people created towns for 5,000 years until the creation of the automobile," he said. "They have real centers. They are compact." They have bike lanes, good sidewalks and "a better balance between pedestrian and cars." They have parks, plazas and public space.

### What is the first step for a community to move in this direction?

"You have to evaluate what you have and see what you can start with," he said. "If you have any bits of old urban fabric, try to save it."

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