

REALTORS® & Smart Growth

on common ground

WINTER 2017

WALKABLE NEIGHBORHOODS

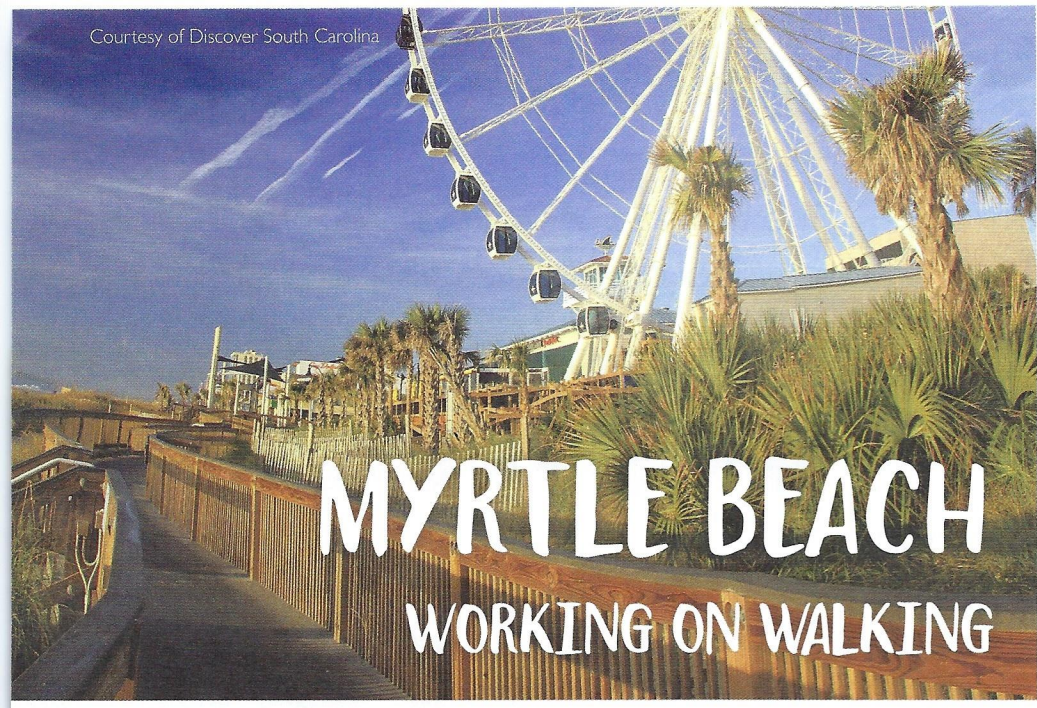
Market Demand for Walkability

Linear Urban Parks

Walking for Healthy Living



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION of
REALTORS®



MYRTLE BEACH WORKING ON WALKING

City planners partner with REALTORS® to focus on walkability

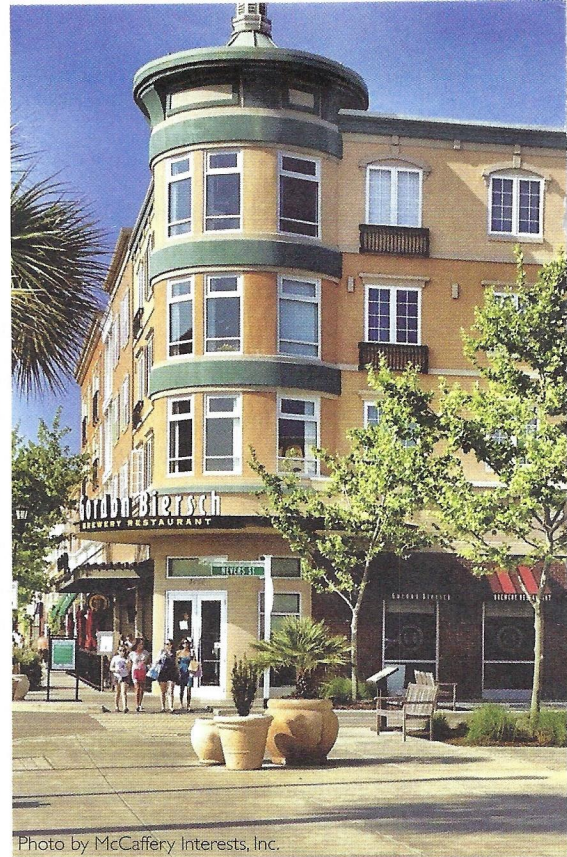


Photo by McCaffery Interests, Inc.

Market Commons in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

By Bobby L. Hickman

Visitors to the popular seaside resort of Myrtle Beach, S. C., can enjoy a beautiful afternoon strolling along the white beaches of the Grand Strand and nearby shops, restaurants, and entertainment venues.

“When you come to Myrtle Beach, you probably drive eight to 10 hours to get here, so you don’t want to stay in your car once you arrive,” said Nate Johnson, government affairs director for the Coastal Carolinas REALTORS® Association. “We have a beautiful boardwalk at the beach. The Ocean Boulevard area has been redone. Utility lines are underground; there are bike lanes and sidewalks. It’s awesome.”

However, for those who venture into the heart of the city, it’s a different story. A major thoroughfare, U.S. 17 (Kings Highway), bisects the old downtown area. Some streets lack sidewalks. In others, businesses stretch to the roadside, so pedestrians must walk into the street to pass. “Some sections of that road are scary,” Johnson added.

The wide lanes were designed to move cars — not people — so tourists and residents find some intersections dangerous, uncomfortable and unwelcoming.

That’s why city leaders and Coastal Carolinas REALTORS® are working together to make the entire city a safer and more pleasant setting for walkers and cyclists. The local association obtained an NAR Smart Growth Grant that brought a nationally known walkability expert to town during the summer of 2016. City planners, private citizens, business leaders and local advocates came together for a “walkshop” — a walkability workshop followed by a walking audit of the most challenging section of downtown. The result was a list of recommendations for making the city more walkable that will be implemented over the next few years.

“Great strides have been made on Ocean Boulevard, but when you get over to Kings Highway, it’s a stopping point,” said Carol Coleman, director of planning for the city of Myrtle Beach. Improving the corridor will help visitors and locals alike. “Tourists are our bread and butter,

City leaders and Coastal Carolinas REALTORS® are working together to make the entire city a safer and more pleasant setting for walkers.



so they knew his work well. They also had some of his posters on the wall at their office, “which we had him autograph,” she laughed.

Johnson added, “I didn’t realize he was the pope of walkability. So when NAR and I offered to bring Burden — an industry guru — to the community, the city planners were quickly on board.”

He first enlisted community support by meeting with the mayor and city managers. Those officials then encouraged others to take part: the police department, private citizens, the Chamber of Commerce, key Department of Transportation personnel and many others. Some 25 participants attended the “walkshop” sessions, conducted on June 30th by Burden and Samantha Thomas of Blue Zones.

In addition to the work sessions, Burden led a walking audit of a 10-block stretch of Kings Highway, taking measurements and making suggestions for improvements. Coleman said she and her staff already had some ideas for upgrades, but they kept quiet to see what Burden recommended first. “He latched on to some of the things we have been saying,” she added. “It was gratifying when someone who is a leader in the profession comes in from the outside and sees some of the same things we noticed.”

For example, Johnson said, Burden found the lanes on Kings Highway were 14 feet wide, but the traffic really only required 10-foot lanes. Simply repainting the lanes to be 10 feet wide on a four-lane stretch makes an extra eight feet available on each side of the road for bike lanes.

Various members of the Myrtle Beach community attended the “walkshop” sessions.

“As we walked, I saw city engineers writing notes on their hands and taking pictures of areas for possible changes,” he said. “Plus, things like repainting the street won’t break the bank: it’s part of the existing maintenance budget.”

In another exercise, the group made a human circle at an intersection to simulate a roundabout. “When cars came by, people slowed down and correctly went around us,” he said. “They knew what to do. It demonstrated how roundabouts slow down traffic and make drivers more aware of the intersection.” New roundabouts — with stop signs and decorative elements — are another approach Myrtle Beach can implement going forward.

After the “walkshop”, Blue Zone produced a 95-page report titled “Walkable Myrtle Beach: Envisioning a More People-Friendly and Prosperous Kings Highway.” The report reviewed current conditions, recapped pedestrian safety issues, covered general walkability principles, shared photographs of problem intersections and made recommendations for specific changes in downtown Myrtle Beach.

The process for implementing those improvements began in early October with a follow-up community session to plan next steps. Coleman said her team has detailed goals

More and more communities are trying to reach out to millennials through walkability initiatives in downtown areas.

but this is not just for tourists,” Coleman added. “A lot of people who live here get around on foot.”

Walkability was already a local concern well before the NAR grant became available. Johnson said there was a committee in place to address walkability and bikeability issues throughout the city, but particularly along King’s Highway. When he learned that NAR was considering offering a pilot program on walkability to local associations, he immediately asked that Myrtle Beach be considered.

“I’m really surprised that other government affairs directors have not pursued this grant opportunity,” Johnson said. “More and more communities are trying to reach out to millennials through walkability initiatives in downtown areas. There are great opportunities to increase the tax base for cities by making downtown more accessible.”

Myrtle Beach’s interest goes beyond providing a more appealing environment for its residents. Tourism is the main industry in the Grand Strand area — a 60-mile arc of

beaches between the Atlantic Ocean and the Intracoastal Waterway. Myrtle Beach anchors the Grand Strand, which drew almost 18 million visitors in 2016, according to the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce. Myrtle Beach has 29,000 permanent residents, and some 200,000 to 250,000 tourists come to the area weekly, Johnson noted. Those visitors flock to the oceanfront boardwalk, the Ferris wheel, coffee shops, restaurants, amusement parks and musical shows near the Atlantic Ocean. But the runners, walkers and bikers who frequent Ocean Boulevard are scarcer downtown.

The Ocean Boulevard improvements accompanied the redevelopment of the former Myrtle Beach Air Force Base property, a 4,000-acre military base that closed in 1993. Some 114 acres at the base were redeveloped as Market Commons. The project was conceived as an urban village, Coleman said, featuring a town center area surrounded by different types of residential districts. “Everything there is walkable and bikeable,” she added. “City leaders have seen that people really do respond to this approach.”

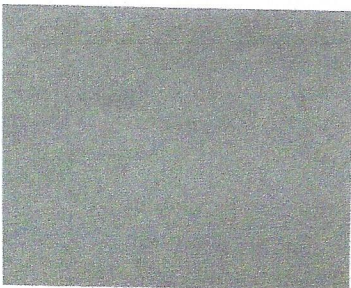
However, she continued, “The problem we see is that other parts of the city haven’t seen the same opportunities.”

The challenge is most acute in the older part of the city where Myrtle Beach originated — where Kings Highway “divides the town like the Mississippi River,” as one resident put it.

Coleman added, “We’re hoping to find a way not necessarily to replicate the success of Market Commons, but to recreate the downtown area so it would have the same opportunities.”

The NAR grant offered a perfect opportunity to focus on revamping downtown Myrtle Beach, Johnson said. Once he got approval to apply for the grant, he went to the Planning Department to see if they were interested. When they saw Dan Burden was one of the people who would come, they jumped at the chance.

Burden is co-founder of the Walkable and Livable Communities Institute and currently a director of Blue Zones LLC, a community well-being improvement initiative. Coleman said she and several of her staff had previously heard Burden speak at national planners’ conferences,



that could be accomplished within 100 days (“low hanging fruit”), in two years, and in five years.

“There are places we hope to do some quick, easy fixes,” Coleman added. “Sidewalks are expensive, but resurfacing a lane and painting a walkable/bikeable corridor is not costly. We expect to see lots of improvements in the not too distant future.”

Johnson added that more than 50 participants were expected to participate in that follow-up session. Some of those newcomers were from other nearby cities along Kings Highway: North Myrtle Beach, Surfside, and Garden City. “Everyone on the Grand Strand has an issue with access, and wants to make the road more pedestrian-friendly and walkable,” he added.

He noted that Myrtle Beach city leaders have already agreed to budget \$200,000 annually for walkability improvements, such as new sidewalks. His goal for 2017 is bringing in an expert on walkability and the economics of downtown areas for another work session.

While walkability often focuses on improved quality of life, it also has significant economic benefits that can help a community. Johnson noted that Myrtle Beach is bounded by water to the east and west, and there is little additional land for new residential or commercial development. “Making the downtown area more accessible will make more opportunities available.”

There are also a number of regular tourists who want to retire in Myrtle Beach. “They’re attracted to the idea of living here and walking to the beach,” Johnson said. One reason millennials and retirees alike are moving to the Market Commons area is the walkable community. “When you retire, you want to be able to walk or take a golf cart to do whatever you want — drop in the local coffee shop, take in a movie or go to the grocery store. The city realizes it could do the same thing downtown.”

The NAR grant has also helped strengthen the working bonds between the city and the Coastal Carolinas association, Johnson and Coleman agree.

“Part of our job is building relationships with local officials and staff,” Johnson noted. “This grant has helped us do that.”

He said city staff members increasingly seek association input on new ordinances being considered, property rights questions, and various housing issues.

Walkability has significant economic benefits that can help a community.



Dan Burden, co-founder of the Walkable and Livable Communities Institute, led a walking audit of Kings Highway in Myrtle Beach.

Coleman agrees. Working with the association on the NAR walkability grant and another placemaking grant has been beneficial for city planners and the community at large. “It’s refreshing to work with a group of people who put their money and their work where their mouth is,” she said. “We don’t work with another group that does so much to benefit the people on a daily basis in Myrtle Beach.” ●

Bobby L. Hickman is a freelance business journalist based in Atlanta.