



# We Need More Car-Optional Neighborhoods. Here's How to Get Started.

Last week I [shared some ideas Victor Dover](#) initially presented for Pensacola's [CiviCon series](#) on why communities struggle to provide affordable housing and how to start fixing that issue. If you didn't get a chance to read it, or if you want to refresh your memory, click [here](#). Also, if you'd like to watch his initial presentation, click [here](#).



Image via [La Citta Vita on Flickr](#).

Victor talks a lot about the fact that affordable housing is intertwined with transportation. Not only do people need to be able to pay their rent or mortgage, they need to be able to get to work (and other places) without long, expensive commutes.

One solution is to create what Victor calls "car optional neighborhoods." In his presentation he talked about a city that has recently undergone a transformation. He said it changed from being a "car place" where pedestrians are grudgingly tolerated to a "pedestrian place" where cars are allowed to visit! And then he laid out a plan for other cities to follow.

Car optional neighborhoods solve many problems. Often at least one person in each household works for a company located nearby and can walk or bike to work, so everyone won't need their own car. (Victor talks about getting big employers like hospitals and universities into the housing game. Providing employees with housing that lets them have a good quality of life, especially when wages haven't kept pace with the cost of living, helps attract and retain talent.)

Not only do such neighborhoods lower the costs of transportation, they're just great places to live. People are drawn to walkable, bikeable places. This makes them magnets for entrepreneurs and investors. I've seen over and over that small businesses like restaurants, coffee shops, craft beer stores, and cool boutiques thrive in walkable areas. These are the kinds of businesses that attract talent and tourism. They're the building blocks of vibrant communities.

Also, walkable, bikeable neighborhoods promote better health. There are fewer carbon emissions. The streets are safer for all pedestrians, including wheelchair users and seniors. Finally, these kinds of neighborhoods create connections. In walkable areas you're more likely to bump into people, strike up a conversation, and really get to know them. All of this makes people feel a sense of belonging and ownership, which leads to civic engagement.

Here are a few tips Victor shared for other communities wishing to create their own car optional neighborhoods:

## **Bring things closer together.**

Assemble a practical blend of mixed-use spaces (residential, commercial, office, entertainment, etc.) in an in-town location. This reduces a lot of car trips to their shortest possible length and eliminates others by facilitating walking, biking, and transit. Part of it is just achieving the minimum livable density that makes transit work and allows people to afford the houses.

## **Design slow, safe, highly walkable and bikeable streets.**

The idea is to create neighborhoods where people would rather walk or bike than drive. As mentioned earlier, this is better for people's health and for the environment. Plus, when people are out of their cars they can smile and speak to each other—which creates a great sense of community.

## **Require street-oriented architecture and big comfortable green spaces.**

When you put those two together, says Victor, it becomes a magical address-making combination. He also says it's important to design buildings so that doors and windows and balconies and storefronts face the street instead of blank walls or garages.

## **Plant street trees and more street trees.**

According to Victor this is the most important principle of all. As I shared last week, when he is redesigning neighborhoods he starts with street scenes—meaning he plants shade trees and adds sidewalks before doing anything else. Trees matter, especially in warm climates.

## **Design for the transportation technology that's coming.**

I thought this was so interesting. Victor talked about designing neighborhoods to accommodate a menu of transportation options. This menu should include not just current things like bike shares and scooter shares, but also future options like autonomous and connected vehicles that will shuttle people around, fleets of

electric vehicles, and small delivery vehicles that require almost no space for parking.

## Right-size the parking.

It stands to reason that car optional neighborhoods won't waste a lot of space on parking. Victor says it's predicted that demand for urban parking spaces will drop by 85%, which will make a lot of room available for affordable housing and more green space and other public purposes.



Image via [La Citta Vita on Flickr](#).

## Put showers in the workplaces.

All this riding bikes to work makes people sweaty!

## Build around a mobility hub.

Of course, people will need transit access to the rest of the region. Victor invited us to imagine concentrations of civic areas and workplace and housing that are built around mobility hubs. There, people can easily switch between the express bus to the scooter or bike share, or a neighborhood circulator, for the last half-mile to and from the transit center.

I am grateful to Victor Dover for helping educate me on this subject. I am seeing more and more evidence that walkable, bikeable neighborhoods are the way of the future. Chuck Marohn and other Strong Towns contributors have written much on this as well. All of us—public officials, developers, business owners and citizens—need to work together to bring them to our communities. These neighborhoods make life better for everyone.