

Something's afoot

Central Florida communities
become more walkable

By Beth Kassab



A few nights ago I walked to dinner. The kids hopped on their bikes, and my husband and I followed on foot. The squeals of soaked toddlers darting in and out of the fountains at the new splash pad started to drown out nearby traffic.

There were wide sidewalks the entire way, and we didn't have to cross any roads more than two lanes wide.

That's something, as someone who surrendered to suburbia long ago, I never thought I would say.

Slowly, though, the places where we live are changing. Oviedo, which I call home, and places such as Winter Springs, Winter Park, Lake Mary and Winter Garden are becoming infinitely more walkable.

No longer is the panache of the "Where should we walk tonight?" conversation solely the domain of people who live in downtown Orlando, Thornton Park, College Park and Audubon Park.

This doesn't just matter on a wonky, urban-planning kind of level. Or even from an environmental level because fewer of us will be driving.

To me, this matters because if I get home from work late and don't feel like cooking, I can get my family on bicycles and be at Panera Bread or Outback Steakhouse in a few minutes.

Oh, and I don't have to feel as bad that I skipped the gym that morning to make an appointment because by the time we walk home, my pedometer will have clocked a few more thousand steps.

Not to mention that my family enjoys these walks through the new Oviedo on the Park.

My 4- and 6-year-olds love to jump off their bikes and climb the cargo net on the playground American Ninja Warrior-style. The expansive lawn that stretches out from the new amphitheater like a green blanket is perfect for running barefoot after a flying Frisbee.

And there's always a few people contemplating their next move on the giant chess board tucked between the playground and the splash pad. The kids practically beg to go some nights.

Not every subdivision is within walking distance of restaurants, shops and other places. But even the mere fact that these so-called town centers are closer to more subdivisions (read: much shorter drives from home) can make life so much easier.

Full disclosure: I don't like the term "town center." So many of them are artificial-looking.

And Oviedo's still has a ways to go before it's complete. But after years of

getting them wrong (e.g., Waterford Lakes), developers are starting to get them right.

So are cities.

And Lake Mary is a great example. A big employment and residential base will continue to nurture the cluster of shops and restaurants along North Fourth Street.

Winter Garden, too. My family and I recently spent an entire day in the one-time citrus town where old packing labels decorate a city fountain.

Until recently I never went to the food-truck night in Oviedo. It was usually held on a Sunday night in the parking lot of the Oviedo Mall.

Driving to a sea of concrete to eat isn't all that appealing. Plus, as one of my neighbors recently put it, "I don't need a food truck on a Sunday night. I have time to cook on Sunday. I need a food truck on a harried Thursday."

And so the recent food-truck night at the new park (on a Thursday) was pretty crowded. The kids munched on chicken bites from Melissa's Chicken & Waffles. My husband and I tried tacos from the Korean BBQ Taco Box and Bem Bom.

Then we set off to leisurely walk back home.

Man, it feels good to say that.