Oklahoma City, Okla.

PROFILE:
POPULATION: 599,309
MEDIAN INCOME: $43,352
MEDIAN HOME VALUE: $130,500
% W/ BACHELOR’S DEGREE: 19.3%
WALK SCORE: 32/100

STATISTICS:
→ MAPS 3 is a 10-year, $777 million construction program that aims to improve the quality of life in Oklahoma City. Funding for MAPS 3 comes from a 1-cent sales tax initiative. (Oklahoma City)

→ MAPS 3 has provided $39.5 million for 32 miles of walking and biking trails and $9.1 million for 35 miles of new sidewalks. (News 9)

→ Spokies, Oklahoma City’s bike share program, reported more than 5,300 rides by mid-2013. Plans call for three new stations. (ACOLQ)

QUOTES:
“We are going to live healthier lives if we spend them outside our cars. When people walk, they engage with their neighbors and have a higher quality of life.”
—MICK CORNETT, mayor of Oklahoma City

“Walkability served as the baseline until after World War I. In the last decade, we’ve been coming back to that because it creates an enjoyable place to be. It is not about getting rid of cars. It’s an option to get around if you don’t want a car.”
—JENNIFER GOODEN, director, Oklahoma City Office of Sustainability

Oklahoma City Steps Up

For decades, the coinciding patterns of urban sprawl and neglect in downtown Oklahoma City created a disjointed and unalluring landscape. Like many cities across the country, transportation and social patterns dominated by the automobile, interstates, interchanges and suburbs had eroded Oklahoma City’s character and energy. But things in the city are starting to change, and biking and walking are at the heart of that rejuvenation.

The terms “walkable” and “bikeable” were not part of the city leadership’s vernacular 40 years ago; today, however, there is a new cultural identity forming around community design. In 1993, city residents voted to fund the Metropolitan Area Projects (MAPS) initiative, a limited-term, 1-cent sales tax that raised $350 million for downtown revitalization. According to Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett, MAPS kick-started the city’s climb into the urban “big leagues.”

What really brought walkability and bikeability to the forefront of issues for the city’s two-term mayor was Oklahoma City’s placement on the list of the most obese cities in the nation. This induced Cornett and the city planning department to start examining the city’s active-transportation infrastructure—its mileage of sidewalks, trails and pedestrian-safe corridors. “We found it was difficult to get around without a car. We had built an incredible grid, but it was designed for cars, not people,” Cornett says. He realized that things needed to change.

In 2007, city leaders financed Project 180, a $176-million initiative that redesigned downtown streets, sidewalks, parks and plazas to make areas more pedestrian-friendly and encourage physical activity. That work continues today and includes the addition of marked bike lanes, street lighting and sidewalks.
“These new sidewalks strengthen our neighborhoods and improve our community’s walkability, safety and health. They enhance our access to libraries, parks, schools, public transit and shopping.”

—MICK CORNETT, mayor of Oklahoma City

“We are experiencing the same thing that the rest of the country is, which is a push to provide more infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists.”

—RANDY ENTZ, Oklahoma City transportation planner

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Outside the downtown core, sidewalks and trails were almost nonexistent. Fully aware of these deficiencies, city residents approved another temporary sales tax increase with MAPS 3 in 2008. The initiative has provided $39.5 million for 32 miles of walking and biking trails and $9.1 million for 35 miles of new sidewalks. Also included are a downtown streetcar system, a 70-acre public park and improvements to make the Oklahoma River a more appealing community destination. In total, MAPS 3 will provide $777 million in public infrastructure improvements, many of which focus on promoting active lifestyles. The fact that this work was entirely funded by voter-approved tax increases speaks volumes about the eagerness of locals to increase walkability and bikeability in and around own neighborhoods.

Despite the improvements, there is still work to be done. Oklahoma City remains high in the rankings in terms of obesity, with one in three residents qualifying as obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And although new trails and sidewalks are being built, Oklahoma City is 43rd among large cities in walking and biking scores.

“Oklahoma City is making progress, but they have a long way to go because of decades of decisions regarding land use and placing cars over other modes of transportation,” says Kate Brady, associate planner for bicycle and pedestrian programs at the Association of Central Oklahoma Governments.

Oklahoma City is still a few years from reaping the myriad benefits that walkability and bikeability have been proven to bring, but thanks to the vision of key leaders and a growing demand from residents, the city is headed in the right direction. There is certainly a lot at stake, including the health of local citizens, the commercial sustainability of downtown and the ability to attract and retain new residents. Oklahoma City’s story contributes to the larger narrative of the changing trajectory of cities across the country.