A Pedestrian Infrastructure and Sidewalk Waiver Policy Plan for Mobile, Alabama
Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

The City of Mobile, Alabama struggles with a history of auto-oriented development, limiting pedestrian accessibility outside of the downtown core. The city’s current comprehensive plan, the Map for Mobile, identifies a collection of “strong” and “weak” places throughout the city to serve as role models for future development. However, the strong places are more readily known for providing amenities than allowing for any form of accessibility, so any future planning for connectivity and pedestrian accessibility will need to be done deliberately and consciously.

While recommendations are made to each of these “weak” places in an attempt to make pedestrian access to resources and opportunities a larger priority than it is currently, an analysis is also made of the city’s sidewalk waiver policy, how decisions are currently made, and how sidewalk waivers can be evaluated to meaningfully improve the city’s sidewalk system by placing a greater focus on land use and less on the existing infrastructure.
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Introduction

The main purpose of this analysis is to evaluate the sidewalk waiver requirements given in the City of Mobile’s subdivision regulations. As it stands, the regulations require the construction of sidewalks on both sides of the street in any subdivision. However, property owners may apply for a sidewalk waiver if they do not want to construct a sidewalk or do not believe that one would be utilized. These applications are then evaluated by the Planning Commission. The goal of this plan is to analyze current Mobile’s current built form, land use, and pedestrian infrastructure to determine where the city stands in regards to walkability and accessibility, as well as what can be done moving forward to help the city improve.

This is done in two ways. First, the city as a whole is to be analyzed based on a few key metrics. One of these is general connectivity. While a well-connected street system does not automatically equate to a well-developed system of pedestrian infrastructure, it does draw a valuable distinction between an area with a street network that allows greater latitude of movement and general mobility and an area with less general mobility. The other major measure is the development of the pedestrian infrastructure network, measured through sidewalk length. While this measure seems pretty straightforward, as more sidewalks equal easier mobility for pedestrians, the connectivity is vital in tempering this metric, because many neighborhood subdivisions will have sidewalks running along both sides of the street, but in a large swath of single-family residential housing with no access to any resources worth walking to. These two measures will be viewed in unison to determine the larger pedestrian accessibility of the area as a whole.

Finally, the city’s sidewalk waiver policy will be evaluated to determine its effectiveness and long-term implications. The history and current effects of the waivers will be analyzed to determine their effect on the pedestrian infrastructure of the city and how neighborhood-based and land use-based plans can be implemented to focus the sidewalk waiver policy to enact greater, more substantial improvements to accessibility.

The second basis of analysis will be a review of current and past plans written for the city to develop pedestrian infrastructure. The most of the important of these is Mobile’s newest comprehensive plan, the Map for Mobile, but other plans will be evaluated as well in order to determine how the city and local community groups have approached pedestrian accessibility as a topic and how previous attempts to improve pedestrian infrastructure have fared. This will consist of an analysis of strong and weak places identified by the Map for Mobile and an evaluation of the pedestrian network available in the areas.
Existing Conditions

As in any other city, Mobile's transportation system is heavily defined by its geographic context. The historic downtown area on the west bank of the Mobile River was obviously the oldest part of the town with future development expanding outwards to the north, south, and west. As the city entered and progressed through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, the expansion pushed even further westward, as shown in Figure 1.

In regards to the city’s transportation system, this method of expansion led to the establish of a number of major radial east-west corridors, such as Airport Boulevard, Government Boulevard/Street, Old Shell Road, and Spring Hill Avenue. While all of these roads converge in Mobile’s downtown or midtown areas, there is a marked lack of major streets that cut across this radial pattern to enable cross connectivity, with possibly the sole exception of Interstate 65, though an interstate will never function the same way as a city street.

downtown and midtown areas that were most heavily developed before the dominance of the automobile have dense, accessible pedestrian networks, compared to areas developed in the suburban, automobile era, with the clearest areas of underserved pedestrian infrastructure occurring at or near the city limits.

The one major exception to this is the large swath of dense sidewalk service directly southwest of downtown, which is why the notion of connectivity is so important to understanding pedestrian accessibility. As shown in Figure 3, the downtown area has a dense concentration of four-way intersections, which would indicate the presence of a consistent grid system. Grids are desirable because they allow movement in any direction, rather than an area with more culs-de-sac that would limit that kind of mobility. Where a street system with poor connectivity can leave two points that are objectively close together separated by the built environment, a grid keeps that relative distance shorter. Looking at the same area southwest of Downtown with the excellent sidewalk, Figure 3 illustrates that the percentage of four-way intersections is comparatively low, painting the picture of a large grouping of residential subdivisions that have sidewalks, even if they do not meaningfully connect residents to local community resources. While pedestrian infrastructure can be added to virtually any road, it will not meaningfully connect residents of the area to things that they need until that type of street connectivity is present.

Connectivity and Infrastructure Metrics

This pattern of annexation is also directly relevant to the intensity of the pedestrian network, as shown in Figure 2. This map divides the city into grid squares. The total length of sidewalk and the total length of street was added up within each square and delivered as a ratio, with darker squares possessing a greater amount of sidewalk length for a given length of street, with lighter areas having less sidewalk or none at all.\footnote{A note of the format of the data used: Because this graphic shows a ratio of the total length of sidewalk to the length of the road, a value of 2 would normally indicate that there were sidewalks along both sides of the road; for 100 feet of road, there would be 100 feet of sidewalk on either side, or 200 total. In this case, the formatting of the sidewalk shapefiles provided by the City of Mobile represents the edges of the sidewalk, not the centerline, so for 100 feet of sidewalk, there would be two 100 foot lines, for a total length of 200 feet. Therefore, a value of 4 would imply a street with sidewalks on both sides.}

Comparing this to the annexation map, the

However, there are no values of 4, because at intersections, the street goes on unimpeded while the sidewalk starts, so even in areas like Downtown with an excellent sidewalk infrastructure, the numbers are still slightly geared towards showing longer street lengths.
Figure 1: Annexation History of Mobile, Alabama (1814 - Present)

Source: City of Mobile GIS Office
Connectivity and Infrastructure Metrics

While accessibility is large, complicated concept that can apply to many things, there are certain land uses and community resources that should certainly be more accessible. For the purposes of this analysis, four land uses have been identified as being especially relevant to walkability. The first is grocery stores, because access to nutritional foods is a universal necessity. The second is pharmacies for similar reasons; people who need medicine should be able to access it without having to own a vehicle. The third land use included is places of worship, in the most general sense. This is less for the purely religious functions of the church, where denominational mismatch might make the proximity of a given church or type of church irrelevant, and more for the community value as polling places, community relief organizations, etc. Finally, multi-family housing was viewed as being particularly benefitted by a developed pedestrian infrastructure, because the density inherent to multi-family housing creates a prime opportunity for efficient, economical mixed-use and walkable development.

Table 1 shows the total number of structures fitting each land use in the city, along with the number of structures that are located within 500 feet of a sidewalk. Any structure located further than 500 feet from a sidewalk was determined to require visitors to walk in the road, on private property, or from the way land use points were located in the data provided by the City of Mobile, 500 feet was an acceptable buffer distance to include grocery stores or pharmacies with large parking lots, without including establishments that were truly inaccessible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>WITHIN 500 FEET OF SIDEWALK</th>
<th>PERCENT ACCESSIBLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grocery Store</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>65.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Worship</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>85.39%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pharmacy</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>96.77%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multifamily Housing</td>
<td>1295</td>
<td>1280</td>
<td>98.84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: City of Mobile Urban Development Division
Existing Plan Analysis

Mobile is currently in the process of creating a new comprehensive plan with the help of the firm of Goodwyn, Mills, and Cawood. Map for Mobile aims to encourage more desirable development patterns by identifying which areas around the city are successful, evaluating their strengths, and showing the city how future areas can be developed to possess the character of the role model areas. The plan also involves the identification of weak areas, both as areas to be improved and as a set of design guidelines should be avoided. The full list of areas is shown in Figure 4.

Strong Places

The strong places identified by the public in the Map for Mobile workshop sessions include the downtown and midtown areas, the Spring Hill neighborhood, Medal of Honor Park, the University of South Alabama, and Dog River. According to the Map for Mobile, these areas are the role models by which the rest of the city should be developed, with mixed land uses, historic character, and frequently cited walkability. However, these areas are diverse enough in usage and function that it is important to break down these larger concepts to understand how accurate local impressions of these areas are and how their strengths can be directly applied to future development.

Downtown Mobile

The Downtown Mobile area is completely unique in the city and how its role as a "strong place" can be used as a role model for future development. Obviously, the downtown area enjoys a level of density unseen anywhere else in Mobile County. Additionally, the downtown area's geographic position along Mobile Bay has clearly shaped the development of the city and how it has been able to expand and relate to the rest of the city.

With the implementation of the Downtown Development District (DDD) in 2014, the downtown area is zoned using a form-based code. The five main districts are T-3, T-4, T-5.1, T5.2, and T6. T-3 is a lower density residential area used that serves as a transition from the residential nature of midtown to the denser downtown core. T-4 functions similarly, but with a greater function on commercial activity. T-5.1 and T-5.2 are both classified as medium intensity districts with a greater focus on mixed uses. Finally, T-6, located on the east end of the DDD, promotes the dense urban feel that the city is promoting in the downtown core, with low parking requirements. There is also an SD-WH district or "special district-warehouse" included in the DDD. This district has extremely few use regulations and was designed with the goal of promoting warehouses, manufacturing, and similar types of buildings in the downtown area.1

This style of form-based code makes a lot of the sense for the DDD. The tiered regulation of land uses and parking requirements in the special districts leading up the downtown core are all designed with the clear goal of developing density. However, the things residents enjoy about the charming Southern feel of the historic downtown area cannot be readily duplicated anywhere else in the city. While identifying downtown as a strong place allows the city to look critically at what is working and what is not working in the downtown, in many ways, it can only serve as a guide for itself.

Midtown Mobile

Midtown is the main corridor leading into and away from Downtown.1 While there is some commercial activity along the major east-west corridors, such as Government Street and Dauphin Street, Midtown is chiefly viewed as residential, and for good reason. The real hallmark of Midtown is the large neighborhoods of historic single-family housing, existing on a well-connected grid system, with a thoroughly developed sidewalk system has made the midtown neighborhood imminently livable. Additionally, Midtown is also home to Murphy High School, which was for many years the largest high school in the city. Murphy's presence serves as a nostalgic throwback to a time of prominent neighborhood schools and engaged communities. From a design standpoint, the midtown corridors are also noteworthy. While only so many people can live

1 While the Oakleigh District was identified in the Map for Mobile as a separate place, it is close enough to Midtown in both location and character that it is being treated as a part of Midtown for the purposes of this analysis.
in the Midtown neighborhood and the residential streets are really only used by local community members, many of the strengths identified by community members were located along the main corridors of Midtown. Government Street is easily the main arterial connecting Downtown to Midtown to West Mobile, but despite the wide lanes and high traffic, it would appear that the historic features of the area, such as the oak trees and large homes, create a distinctive, pleasant environment.

While there are many amenities in the Midtown area that would be difficult to produce anywhere else in the city, such as the exclusively historic features, there are a number of key benefits here that can be applied elsewhere. While it would be difficult to implement a street grid anywhere that one does not currently exist, the walkable neighborhoods and medium-density residential area conducive to a community school like Murphy High School can be considered and planned for moving forward.

The University of South Alabama

While Mobile possesses its fair share of private and religious post-secondary educational institutions, such as Spring Hill College and the University of Mobile, the University of South Alabama (USA) is the main public university for both the city and a large part of southern part of the state. With a current student population of sixteen thousand students, the fact that the campus would be a hub for activity is fairly intuitive, especially considering that just under a third of students live in some manner of university-affiliated housing.

However, the USA campus is interestingly positioned. The bulk of campus is located at the intersection of Old Shell Road and University Boulevard, which is where most community members identified the strengths of the campus area. However, neither of these roads are particularly conducive to the type of larger university community that would be found in other campus areas, with ready access to restaurants, bars, etc. Both have four traffic lanes with additional turn or center lanes for the majority of their run along USA’s frontage, heavily impeding connectivity to any of the establishments across Old Shell. On the other hand, the majority of the property on the other side of University is zoned as single-family residential, which is inherently less of a destination than a commercial area might be.

While the campus itself is extremely walkable with a well-developed pedestrian infrastructure system, making it easy to get from the academic buildings to the student housing to any of the campus sports venues, the areas connecting campus to the surrounding community simply are not walkable. There are trendier coffee shops and restaurants, but they are all clearly meant to be driven to. This would give the impression that the strengths of the area as identified by the community are the connectivity within the campus and the value of the area as a destination, whether for academics or for the athletic events taking place there, which certainly have a large amount of community value for Mobilians. However, as in the case of Downtown and Midtown, these are traits that cannot be readily applied as a role model for future development.

Spring Hill

The Spring Hill neighborhood is one of the older, wealthier residential neighborhoods in the Mobile area, full of the city’s older valuable institutions. Located near the University of South Alabama, this area is also home to Spring Hill College, a private Catholic institution, as well as St. Paul’s Episcopal Church. The area is also home to two intersections with prominent commercial activity, the intersection of McGregor and Zeigler and the intersection of McGregor and Old Shell Road. These intersections are home to local businesses such as Pollman’s bakery that have long-standing rapport and value within the surrounding community.

While the actual residential area of the Spring Hill neighborhood actually has a fairly well connected street system, the pedestrian infrastructure is surprisingly underdeveloped. In 2008, The Village of Spring Hill, a non-profit organization dedicated to the improvement of the Spring Hill neighborhood, created a plan that identified a set of four “First Principles” that would need to be adhered to for the neighborhood to be a successful district. One of these principles, “Walkable street scenes,” includes a list of ten design guidelines to improve the Spring Hill streets. These guidelines include keeping the streets human-scale, designing for pedestrians first and
foremost, allowing for shade, and even encouraging design principles that place surface parking behind structures rather than directly on the street. All in all, the section is a comprehensive approach to designing a walkable, mixed-use neighborhood.1

However, eight years later, the actual pedestrian infrastructure of the neighborhood is less than stellar. While the main corridors have sidewalks along most of their length, the actual residential areas are still largely underserviced, which is unusual given the general attractiveness of the neighborhood. However, sidewalk improvements still seem to be a heavy focus for the Village of Spring Hill, with frequent events being scheduled to raise additional money to promote walkability.


**Municipal Park**

Municipal Park is an interesting area in terms of strong and weak areas in that it was not listed with the other strong areas in the Map for Mobile plan. While the area was clearly viewed favorably judging from the data points on the map included in Map for Mobile, the fact that it is considered to be part of the Spring Hill neighborhood meant that Municipal Park was lumped in with the rest of Spring Hill. However, Municipal Park has a different identity and a different set of amenities and connectivity assets than the rest of Spring Hill and therefore warrants its own analysis.

In addition to being a park with open space and natural features, Municipal Park also has a dense concentration of Mobile’s cultural amenities. The area has more than its fair share of athletic venues, such as the Mobile Tennis Center, the Azalea City Golf Course, and the Langan Ball Park. However, the park is also home to the Playhouse in the Park and the Mobile Museum of Art, which are both frequently utilized for local school field trips, as well as by the community at large.

While the park is easily navigable within the site itself, much like the University of South Alabama campus, the layout of the surrounding area is not particularly conducive to pedestrian activity, due to how expansive the site is and the low density of the surrounding area. While the roads within the park have sidewalks running down at least one side of most of the length of the road, Zeigler has no sidewalks for most of its run along the length of the of the park and the sidewalk running along this stretch of University is on the other side of the street. As the case with many of the other strong areas of the city, the strength of Municipal Park lies more with the amenities available than the strength of the pedestrian infrastructure network.

**Medal of Honor Park**

Medal of Honor (or Cottage Hill) Park is the largest and most frequented park in Mobile. As far as parks go, it is fairly full-service, with a baseball field, soccer field, basketball courts, tennis courts, nature trails, a dog park, and even a disc golf course. Activity at the park stays pretty consistent, with children’s birthday parties, field trip stops, family reunions, and community gatherings all taking place there.

Once again, these are features that are difficult to take and apply to developing new areas: a park can really only be used as a guide to design another park. While Medal of Honor Park is an amazing park, it can offer little in developing a walkable, mixed-use neighborhood or an auto-oriented commercial corridor.

However, there are some meaningful aspects of the park’s design and location that would be relevant to take note of. For example, the park has frontage on both Hillcrest Road and Knollwood Road, increasing accessibility for the large number of people living in the surrounding subdivisions. While Hillcrest Road is heavily trafficked to be sure, there are sidewalks on both sides of the street and getting to Medal of Honor Park from any of the residential subdivisions on the other side of the street is certainly doable, though it would more accessible with a protected way of crossing the street. While the Hillcrest entrance to the park has a long entryway before any of the parks amenities can actually be reached, the frontage along Knollwood is comparatively open and allows for visitors to enter directly into the sporting areas or the path surrounding the park. Knollwood is also only two lanes, with dense multifamily use and Knollwood School directly across the street from the park, encouraging further activity and walkability.
Dog River
Dog River is a waterway located in the southern part of the city. The obvious attraction of Dog River is the proximity to nature and to water, which is fairly intuitive, since the geography of Mobile allows its residents to enjoy broad access to water. This creates an interesting geographic phenomenon. The land around the river is obviously zoned residential, but the actual attraction of the area is the river itself, which is accessible to anyone with a vehicle to access the water.

Being an aquatic attraction, the pedestrian infrastructure in this area is intuitively underdeveloped. While Dog River holds strong community value, connectivity and accessibility play a very small part in this.
Weak Places
The places designated as "weak" in the community workshops are as similar to one another in characteristics as the strong places are. Where strong places shared historic natures and cultural amenities, the weak places can be divided into two neat groups: high-volume corridors and low-income neighborhoods with large minority populations.

Waterfront
It is certainly interesting that the downtown area was identified as being so strong, where the waterfront located in the same area was critiqued so heavily. Downtown Mobile is a beautiful area located on Mobile River, but the actual water is, in a very meaningful sense, separated from the rest of downtown.

As a major waterway in a port city, this is understandable in a sense. The river serves a large function in vessels moving in and out of the bay, so the areas surrounding the river both near downtown and further north are zoned for heavy industrial uses, rather than being designated for open space or public usage.

While there are certainly connectivity issues here, they are related more to how the space of downtown connects to the river, and less on general accessibility. While the riverfront is viewed as somewhat of a missed opportunity, the weaknesses inherent to the areas are unrelated to a lack of meaningful pedestrian access.

Airport Boulevard Corridor
As far as weak places go in the city, Airport Boulevard between University and Bel-Air Mall has to be one of the most notorious areas in the city. One of the most prominent retail corridors in the city, this stretch of Airport Boulevard features both the I-65 interchange as well as the largest mall in the city. This intersection of local activity and traffic coming off of the interstate created one of the more challenging areas to navigate in the city.

The accessibility issues that Airport Boulevard deals with are pretty intuitive. Relating to the traffic alone, the intersection of Airport and University gained especial notoriety in 2001 for being the most dangerous intersection in the state. Of course, further issues come into play when analyzing the pedestrian accessibility of the area. This section of Airport Boulevard is at least six lanes for the entirety of this stretch, not counting center lanes and turn lanes. There are also two lane service roads along each side of Airport Boulevard for the majority of this run. Sidewalks, however, only run along one side of the road for roughly a third of the area marked as problematic by the community members. It would difficult to imagine an area more auto-oriented than Airport Boulevard, but its status as one of the city's main east-west corridors make it a necessary evil for many citizens to bear.

Unlike many of the areas marked as "strong places" by the community members, Airport Boulevard's relevance to Map for Mobile pertains directly to its pedestrian accessibility and lack of connectivity.
AIRPORT BOULEVARD CORRIDOR

Legend

ZONING DISTRICT
B-1  B-2  I-1  LB-2  R-2
B-3  I-2  R-1  R-3

Source: City of Mobile GIS Office
Government Street Corridor

Government Street as a whole is a vital roadway to the city. Government Street is the main corridor running through Midtown and Downtown Mobile, but west of Midtown Government Street effectively splits into Airport Boulevard and Government Boulevard. The majority of the spots identified as inconvenient or undesirable along the Government Boulevard Corridor occur between Demetropolis Road and the I-65 interchange. This stretch contains a combination of retail and single-family residential neighborhoods found along adjacent service roads. While some of the establishments along the corridor are reasonably well-frequented, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles office or the movie theatre east of I-65, this section of Government Street very much functions as just a way of getting from one place to another, whether to get from West Mobile into Downtown, or get onto interstate to head either north or down to I-10.

While this corridor is only four lanes, which does not necessarily preclude accessibility, the fact that Government Boulevard is also a federal highway means that the thoroughfare requires a certain level of speed to stay as efficient as it needs to be. Government Boulevard cannot operate with frequent stops or a dense cluster of destination parks and retailers, because its role as a highway is a necessary one. While the highway is certainly a bland area with enough activity to be necessary but not enough to be entertaining, improvements to the pedestrian infrastructure here are not necessarily appropriate.

Dauphin Island Parkway

The Dauphin Island Parkway intuitively connects Airport Boulevard where it meets the western edge of Midtown south to Dauphin Island, also functioning as State Route 163. While a long corridor, the real weaknesses identified by the community are all south of Interstate 10, running most of the way to Dauphin Island. Interestingly enough, this corridor is only about a mile away from the stronger areas of Dog River. However, where the property owners north of the river tend to be wealthier, Dauphin Island Parkway runs across a peninsula with lower medium household incomes.

While the larger Dauphin Island Parkway area is mostly residential, the majority of the property on the highway itself is commercial, with Pillans Middle School, Dr. Robert W. Gilliard Elementary School, B.C. Rain High School also located along the route. The commercial activity is generally working-class retail and fast food establishments with large amounts of surface parking directly off of the highway.

In terms of pedestrian accessibility, this area functions somewhat similarly to the Government Boulevard corridor. It is likely viewed as a weak area because it simply is not very entertaining. The corridor exists to connect Mobile and Dauphin Island, which it does, and while there are enough businesses and restaurants to sustain the people who live in the immediate area, it does not offer much to bring people in from the rest of the city. While pedestrian accessibility is certainly limited, similarly to the Government Boulevard corridor, the Dauphin Island Parkway’s status as a state highway makes it difficult to justify disrupting the flow of traffic for an area that was meant to be auto-oriented.
Michigan Avenue

Michigan Avenue extends south from Government Street to Interstate 10. While the sections of Michigan Avenue closer to Midtown appear more like Midtown sociodemographically, the area south of Tennessee Street functions very different. Much like the rest of the Midtown district, this area is predominantly zoned as single-family residential, with some light commercial uses such as fast food restaurants, specialty grocery stores, etc. moving closer to Arlington Street. However, the southern part of the area is zoned multi-family, largely being occupied by public housing.

From a transportation standpoint, looking at pedestrian infrastructure and accessibility, Michigan Avenue actually has a lot of things going for it. This area shares the same well-connected grid system that the rest of Midtown has. Most of the area has a well-developed sidewalk system, particularly along Michigan, the neighborhood to the east, and the multifamily district to the south.

However, Michigan Avenue has greater issues not related to pedestrian infrastructure and walkability with median incomes among the lowest in Mobile County. High vacancy rates are apparent to anyone traveling through the area which, coupled with the reputation for areas with public housing, gives the Michigan Avenue a very rough reputation.

Africatown-Plateau

The Africatown-Plateau area refers to the neighborhood immediately west of the Mobile River, across the Cochran Bridge. East of Telegraph Road, the neighborhood is largely zoned residential surrounded by large swaths of land zoned for heavy industry. While there are small areas of commercial and multi-family properties, this neighborhood seems to have land uses follow the land use patterns of the neighboring city of Pritchard more than Mobile itself.

The Africatown-Plateau area is difficult to evaluate from a pedestrian infrastructure standpoint, simply because there is comparatively less to it than the other places identified by the Map for Mobile workshops. There is little mixture of uses. There is no larger corridor that the area is designed around. The residential area north of Bay Bridge Road has some limited sidewalk development, with a more extensive network in the multi-family district. However, due to the lack of activity or real substance for the community members to take issue with, the weakness of this part of town is likely due in large part to the large percentage of vacant structures off of Bay Bridge Road, which is the main vantage that people traveling through the area on the way to Interstate 165 will experience.
St. Stephens Road/
Toulminville
The St. Stephens Road corridor going through Toulminville is positioned similarly to the Africatown/Plateau place, in that a lot of its identity rests on it being adjacent to Prichard. It is also similar in regards to having low median incomes, a predominantly black population, and an overwhelmingly residential orientation.

However, the St. Stephens corridor does support a substantial commercial foundation or a largely similar nature to the Dauphin Island Parkway. There are a few working class style stores such as Family Dollar and a number of fast food restaurants.

While Toulminville is almost certainly considered to be a weak place for the same reasons as Africatown/Plateau and Michigan Avenue, there are still some clear assets in regards to pedestrian infrastructure that should be considered. While most of the residential neighborhoods in the area do not have sidewalks, the majority of St. Stephen’s does, as well as the nearby Gorgas Park. While the neighborhood has its fair share of culs-de-sac, it also manages to largely keep the grid system of nearby Midtown intact, as well as the residential density, which is a major asset for any active transportation system.

Old Shell Road/Spring Hill
Avenue Corridors
The Old Shell Road and Spring Hill Avenue corridors between Midtown and Interstate 65 collectively form the final weak spot identified by community residents. Like many of the other sites analyzed, the area surrounding these corridors is largely residential, with commercial activity running along the corridors themselves. The commercial activity in the area is largely dominated by fast food chains and auto supply and repair shops. However, one major difference between this area and the other areas discussed is the presence of two of Mobile’s more historic schools: Phillips Preparatory Middle School and UMS-Wright Preparatory School. Another noteworthy difference is that while these corridors run right up to I-65, there is no exit ramp on either corridor. There is a service road running along the area and traffic can certainly move quickly through the area, but the volume is very different than it would be if the on-ramp was right on the site.

While the area is somewhat middle of the pack for the city in terms of aggregated sidewalk structure and connectivity, the distribution of the existing infrastructure is somewhat similar to that of Toulminville. While Old Shell has very little sidewalk lengths, as does the residential portion of this area, Spring Hill has a developed sidewalk system for most of its length through the area.
Assessment

There are obviously many different factors that people were considering when deciding whether a place was strong or weak. By and large, however, the strong places were destinations, like parks, shopping areas, and entertainment venues. Some of them, like downtown and midtown, did have a substantial focus on connectivity and accessibility. Others, such as the USA campus or Dog River, had a lot going on within the site itself, but no real way to move from one site to another without a vehicle. While the community overwhelmingly said that they wanted mixed-use, walkable spaces, only two of them were viewed strongly and, while both downtown and midtown are vital aspects of Mobile’s community and identity, they offer little in terms of how we can shape other areas of the city. Both of them are older parts of the city with levels of density and history that cannot simply be imposed in West Mobile.

Inversely, many areas that were considered to be weak parts of the city have a substantial pedestrian network available to them, such as Michigan Avenue, but other factors, such as poverty rates, vacancy, or crime, simply make the areas uncomfortable to live in. Unfortunately for areas like the Government Boulevard corridor and the Dauphin Island Parkway, there is little that can be done to change accessibility issues due to jurisdictional issues and existing pressures on those roadways to sustain large amounts of daily trips as speedily and efficiently as possible.

Corridor Improvements

Mobile has some areas that are very well suited for pedestrian usage and accessibility. However, due to the large scale of the city, regular travel along state and federal highways is a fact of life for Mobile residents. Residents spend a lot of time on corridors such as Government Boulevard, Airport Boulevard, or the Dauphin Island Parkway, but the purposes of those corridors depend on high traffic activity. Implementing sidewalks, buffers, etc. would compromise that activity in a way that just may not be necessary.

Table 2 shows the average daily trips of the main highways running through the city. Clearly, Government Boulevard has the most trips, stemming from the heavy traffic off of Interstate 65, and consequently the majority of the commercial locations along Government are accessed only through service roads. Spring Hill and St. Stephens, by comparison, have fewer trips, so more of the activity is able to take place off of the highway itself. If measures were to be taken to promote walkability and try and revitalize “weak places” in the community, the Toulminville area along St. Stephens Road and the area between the Old Shell Road and Spring Hill Avenue Corridors would be the prime candidates for that.

In either case, there are a few key measures to consider in the case of development. While both areas have a solid foundation of pedestrian infrastructure, pedestrian accessibility can only exist if visitors and residents of the area are able to get from one side of the street to the other, which would require crosswalks in both areas. While feasible, any measure that would interfere with these corridors would require the cooperation of the Alabama Department of Transportation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CORRIDOR</th>
<th>AVERAGE DAILY TRIPS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dauphin Island Parkway (South of I-10)</td>
<td>24,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Street (Downtown Area)</td>
<td>21,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Boulevard (I-65 Interchange)</td>
<td>27,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring Hill Avenue (Midtown)</td>
<td>18,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Stephens Road (Between Midtown and Prichard)</td>
<td>14,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Alabama Department of Transportation Highway Traffic Counts
Conclusion
There are obviously many different factors that 
people were considering when deciding whether a 
place was strong or weak. By and large, however, the 
strong places were destinations, like parks, shopping 
areas, and entertainment venues. Some of them, like 
downtown and midtown, did have a substantial focus 
on connectivity and accessibility. Others, such as the 
USA campus or Dog River, had a lot going on within 
the site itself, but no real way to move from one site 
to another without a vehicle. While the community 
overwhelmingly said that they wanted mixed-use, 
walkable spaces, only two of them were viewed 
strongly and, while both downtown and midtown are 
vital aspects of Mobile’s community and identity, they 
offer little in terms of how we can shape other areas of 
the city. Both of them are older parts of the city with 
levels of density and history that cannot simply be 
imposed in West Mobile.

Inversely, many areas that were considered to be 
weak parts of the city have a substantial pedestrian 
network available to them, such as Michigan Avenue, 
but other factors, such as poverty rates, vacancy, or 
crime, simply make the areas uncomfortable to live 
in. Unfortunately for areas like the Government 
Boulevard corridor and the Dauphin Island Parkway, 
there is little that can be done to change accessibility 
issues due to jurisdictional issues and existing 
pressures on those roadways to sustain large amounts 
of daily trips as speedily and efficiently as possible.
Sidewalk Waiver Policy and Recommendations

Background
Section VI of Mobile’s subdivision regulations currently cite sidewalks as a required improvement for subdivision development, along with sewerage, water supply, street signs, and other basic necessities for development. The regulation states:

“Sidewalks shall be provided on both sides of streets of a subdivision simultaneously with construction of buildings therein. Sidewalks along or contiguous to common areas or “non-lotted” areas within a proposed subdivision shall be installed prior to recording a final plat. Sidewalks shall be 4 feet wide and shall be located in the street right-of-way one foot from the property line. Crosswalkways shall be provided with paved walks 4 feet wide; sidewalks and paved walks of crosswalkways shall be concrete at least 4 inches thick.”

The regulations also allow for the application of a sidewalk waiver that would allow property owners and developers to construct a building on a property without providing a sidewalk. However, the only information that the regulations provide about sidewalk waivers is that the application fee is a flat $100.00.

As with other land use requests, like zoning variances, the only official reason to allow a sidewalk waiver is if the property has some feature that inherently makes it impossible to reasonably build a sidewalk, such as an intense slope. However, the Planning Commission’s approach to evaluating sidewalk waivers is not especially consistent. As shown in Table 3, roughly three quarters of sidewalk waiver applications are approved. However, the most commonly cited reasons for an application being filed are that the sidewalk would not be used because no one walks in the area or that there are no other sidewalks, so the system would begin and end with the property lines.

Table 3: Sidewalk Waiver Application Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DECISION</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>PERCENT OF TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>APPROVED</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>70.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DENIED</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTIALLY APPROVED</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WITHDRAWN</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOLDOVER</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEMPORARY APPROVAL</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNKNOWN</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>≈100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: City of Mobile GIS Office and Urban Development Division
Policy Analysis

While it is certainly understandable that a property owner would be hesitant to pay for sidewalks that would not be used, allowing that disinclination to be guide future sidewalk development can only perpetuate the status quo and allow future service gaps to persist. While the areas may currently see low pedestrian activity, which the waiver applicant could attribute to high traffic speeds or few pedestrian amenities, the cause could just as easily be traced back to the fact that there is no sidewalk for pedestrians to use. Each waiver application needs to be evaluated carefully to determine whether or not the induced demand created by the sidewalk would contribute meaningfully to accessibility in the area.

Generally, sidewalk system improvements are carried out actively and deliberately as either part of a comprehensive plan or a specific plan increasing accessibility. While sidewalk waiver policy can be tightened or focused to incrementally fill in gaps in the system, it is rarely used as a conscious tool.

The most prominent example of sidewalk waivers being utilized in that way would be Sandy Springs, Georgia. In May 2015, the city planning staff created the controversial policy that sidewalks would be implemented wherever a building permit was issued with exceptions only made for topographical and drainage issues. When the backlash against the plan proved to be formidable, the city staffers proffered a compromise: if there was a sidewalk on one side of the street, if the sidewalk had a negative effect on protected trees, if there was no sidewalk within 500 feet of the site, or if the site was within 1,200 feet of a sidewalk a sidewalk waiver could be applied for. However, instead of the $100 flat application fee required in Mobile, Sandy Springs charged $150 a foot, which would be put into a designated fund to extend the sidewalk system.²

After a series of revisions, Sandy Springs lowered the fee to $100 a foot for in-fill residences along designated corridors in the Sidewalk Master Plan in


September 2015. However, as of January 2016, the city council has decided to suspend the sidewalk requirement altogether for infill single-family homes, with the city raising impact fees on larger developments to fund sidewalk construction itself. However, multi-family residences, commercial and industrial properties, and new residential subdivisions still function under the original system, with few waivers and $150 fee for every foot of sidewalk not constructed.²

There are a few key takeaways from the Sandy Springs approach to sidewalk waiver policy. The first is the strictness of it. While there were many complaints from community members about being forced to construct “sidewalks to nowhere,” where a piece of property would be the only lot with a sidewalk in front of it in the area, the idea behind the policy is that the sidewalk system would complete itself over time. While the policy is new and results supporting its success are inconclusive, it is clearly an aggressive, strict policy with the improvement of pedestrian accessibility as its number one priority. The second key feature of this policy is the consideration of land uses as a factor in sidewalk waiver considerations. While a blanket policy led to an undue burden on single-family property owners, different policies for different contexts allow the policy to be more effective and politically feasible.


Sidewalk Waiver Recommendations

Sidewalk waivers will be a crucial step in implementing improvements to pedestrian accessibility. Moving forward, the planning commission will need to actively evaluate sidewalk waiver applications in accordance with a larger governing vision. As shown in Figure 5, sidewalk waiver applications have varied erratically since 1991.¹ However, a series of clear peaks and valleys is present. Applications were low in 1991, increasing

1 1991 marks the beginning of consistent the sidewalk application data provided in the GIS data from the City of Mobile.
Figure 4: Sidewalk Waiver Application Locations and Decisions
until 2001, when they fell dramatically. They then rose again, only to crash for a second time in 2009 and 2010, possibly due to recovery from the housing crisis. However, they have been on the rise since then, so the planning commission may have a great deal of latitude in shaping future gaps or connections in pedestrian infrastructure.

The recommendations for sidewalk waiver application reform take place in two forms. The first are area-specific concepts to improve neighborhoods cohesively. For example, the Spring Hill neighborhood has the urban form and mix of land uses necessary to create an improved sidewalk system, between the University, the commercial area at McGregor and Old Shell Road, and the swaths of single-family residential neighborhoods. Perhaps more important, developing the sidewalks is also a stated goal of The Village of Spring Hill, so increased scrutiny in the evaluation of sidewalk waiver applications would be cohesive with the community's goals for itself. As shown in Figure 4, the clusters of sidewalk waiver applications follow a clear geographical pattern, clustering along Interstate 65, including the Spring Hill neighborhood.

In general, from a neighborhood-based approach to sidewalk waiver policy, the areas surrounding and east of I-65 have the most to be gained from an improve sidewalk network, largely due to the existing mixture of land uses and well-connected layout of the streets. Areas with commercial corridors surrounded by residential neighborhoods, such as Spring Hill or the Midtown Loop are the prime candidates for neighborhood-based sidewalk waiver policy review.

While policies based on neighborhoods are conducive to creating well-developed places and districts, smaller use-based policies can be adopted to connect general, case-by-case accessibility. With this strategy, specific land uses would be identified and all sidewalk waiver applications within half a mile, the distance that pedestrians will generally walk to reach a destination, will face enhanced scrutiny when being heard by the planning commission. These would naturally need to be land uses that function on a comparatively long-term scale, such as schools, grocery stores, and pharmacies.

The important thing with a land use-based approach would be consistency. A common mistake in transportation planning is looking at an area with low pedestrian activity and assuming that a sidewalk would not be used there, without ever factoring in induced demand. For this reason, a land use-based approach to sidewalk waiver regulation should also be bounded by the proximity of residential properties. A preferable land use-based sidewalk waiver policy would call for enhanced scrutiny for any site within half a mile, or 2,640 feet, of both a critical land use and a neighborhood of residentially zoned property.

Figure 5: Sidewalk Waiver Applications (1991-2014)

Source: City of Mobile Urban Development Division
(Note: Full breakdown of all available applications by year included in Appendix C)
Recommendations

- Enhanced scrutiny of sidewalk waiver applications for sites that fall within half a mile of a school, a grocery store, or a pharmacy, as well as a residentially zoned property.
- Identification of mixed use corridors better Interstate 65 and Midtown located on streets with fewer than 10,000 average daily trips.
- Collaboration with the Alabama Department of Transportation to discuss the implementation of pedestrian aids, such as crosswalks, along lower traffic highways with diverse land uses and surrounding residential neighborhoods.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are a number of strong districts in the City of Mobile that combine dense, mixed-use development with a strong pedestrian infrastructure. However, as development moves westward, the urban form of the city becomes increasingly auto-oriented, lacking a sufficient sidewalk system and frequently possessing a road system that makes it difficult to implement one. However, there are a number of areas in the city, most frequently commercial areas on lower traffic corridors surrounded by residential areas that can be identified and used to implement walkable districts.
Appendix A: Sidewalk Waiver Application Locations and Decisions with Places

Legend
Sidewalk Waivers
DECISION
- APPROVED (329)
- DENIED (111)
- DENIED/APPROVED (8)
- APPROVED/DENIED (1)
- TEMPORARY APPROVAL (1)
- WITHDRAWN (11)
- HOLDOVER (4)

Major Roads

0 0.5 1 2 3 4 Miles
### Appendix C: Total Number of Sidewalk Applications by Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Applications</th>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
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