

Sidewalk Solutions

PEDS identifies issues, but city doesn't have money for repairs due to budget crisis



PHOTOS BY JOHN BECKER

This cracked sidewalk in Grant Park, which is missing its decorative octagonal tiles, is just one of the many identified by PEDS in its sidewalk survey, which shows 35 percent of the city's sidewalk need repair.

Editor's Note: This is Part Two of a series that began in the June issue about PEDS' inventory of Atlanta's sidewalks.

By John Becker

Atlanta's Department of Public Works recently estimated that a whopping 400 miles of sidewalk – about 20 percent of the city's pedestrian pathways – need repair or replacement.

An informal survey conducted in April by Atlanta's pedestrian advocacy group PEDS suggests the situation may be even worse. Forty-three volunteers inspected sidewalks adjacent to 3,012 residential and commercial properties looking for gaps or cracks of an inch or more; tripping hazards of one-half inch or more; sidewalks buckled by tree root growth and broken, loose or uneven bricks or pavers.

Along parts of Hosea L. Williams Drive, for example, 95 percent of the sidewalk is in disrepair. Things weren't much better on parts of Kirkwood Avenue and Memorial Drive, where more than 75 percent of the sidewalk is broken. Not surprisingly, newer parts of town fared much better in the survey.

Bottom line: PEDS estimates that, on average, 35 percent of the city's sidewalks need fixing.

"We wanted to determine how accurate the city's assessment of the problem is," said PEDS President and CEO Sally Flocks, "and it looks like the assessment is fairly accurate."

"But if a quarter to a third of Atlanta's sidewalks is broken," she continued, "and we're not making significant progress with repairs – something's wrong."

Joe Basista, the city's public works commissioner, agreed. "It's clear we have a large backlog of sidewalks that are out of life cycle and need replacement, very likely about 400 miles worth at an approximate capital cost of \$80 million," Basista said.

And that's just part of \$500 million in overall infrastructure improvements needed citywide, according to Basista. Such are the realities of living in an aging city.

"To make matters worse," Basista continued, "we have no source of capital funding today to make the needed repairs."

Basista pointed out his operating budget isn't designed to fix the city's accumulated sidewalk woes, including funding for only a few concrete repair crews that handle emergency work and minor repairs.

The amount of money public works allocates to sidewalk maintenance relates, at least in part, to the fact that city policy requires citizens whose property abuts damaged sidewalk to pay for its repair. Why allocate funding to pay for something residents are expected – at least in theory – to pay for?

But many people – Flocks included – consider the policy unfair to both property owners and pedestrians.

The policy enables the city to notify property owners of the need to repair or replace sidewalk, Basista explains. If the owner doesn't comply, the city can make repairs and seek reimbursement from the owner – up to and including filing a lien on the property.

Basista feels the efforts of PEDS and oth-

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JOHN BECKER

Overgrown and broken sidewalks are plentiful in southeast Atlanta, PEDS volunteers discovered.

ers should be focused more on identifying a funding source for sidewalk improvements than on the maintenance policy itself.

"City Council will ultimately determine whether the policy stays or goes whenever a funding source is identified," Basista said.

Both Flocks and Basista agree that a bond referendum is the most likely source of funding for significant sidewalk repair.

"With a third of our sidewalks in need of repair, if we don't borrow money we're not likely to see significant improvement in your or my lifetime," she said.

In presentations to the City Council, Basista has recommended \$250 million in bonds to fund at least part of the needed improvements. The Council would have to approve the referendum, then it would go before voters.

Flocks and Basista agreed it won't be easy getting a bond referendum past the City Council – or voters – any time soon. Both feel Atlantans would be hard-pressed to approve a significant property tax increase – and the Council would not be inclined to ask them – if Mayor Shirley Franklin's pending request for a 3 mill property tax increase to provide additional funding for the city's current operating budget is approved.

"The earliest I see this being considered by voters would be summer of 2010," Basista said. **IN**



JOHN BECKER

The root systems of large, old-growth trees have damaged sidewalks in the Poncey-Highland area.