



**City of Ann Arbor
2011 Street Reconstruction Millage
Public Engagement Project Report
July 8, 2011**

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Executive Summary

The City of Ann Arbor's Street Reconstruction Millage ("Street Millage") expires at the end of 2011. Since the 1980s, the 2-mill Street Millage has provided critical funding - and the ability to leverage matching federal and state dollars - to ensure the quality of Ann Arbor streets. A 2-mill levy translates into approximately \$214/year for a resident with an average home in the City of Ann Arbor (average market value \$214,000; assessed taxable value \$107,000).

This year also marks the conclusion of a multi-year, city-wide sidewalk inspection program. By the end of 2011, all sidewalks will have either been repaired properly by property owners, or the City will have completed the repairs (having assessed costs of construction, plus administrative costs, to non-compliant property owners). Over the duration of the sidewalk program, City staff have received citizen feedback suggesting that the public interest may be better served if the City of Ann Arbor, rather than property owners, were to assume responsibility for sidewalk repairs on an ongoing basis. This feedback aligns with the City of Ann Arbor's proven commitment to meeting the community's diverse transportation needs and desires. Maintaining the sidewalks in a "complete streets" manner consistent to the way city streets are maintained supports ease of use not only for motorists but also pedestrians and cyclists, people using strollers, and people using walkers or wheelchairs.

If the City were to assume responsibility for sidewalks, a funding stream would need to be identified. Because the sidewalk inspection and repair cycle has been completed, City staff estimate that an ongoing commitment to repairing sidewalks city-wide could be satisfied with approximately \$500,000 per year, or the equivalent of a one-eighth (0.125) mill tax for property owners. This magnitude of millage translates to approximately \$13.38 for a resident with an average home in Ann Arbor (assessed home value of \$107,000; market value \$214,000). One way to achieve this funding stream would be to expand the Street and Bridge Reconstruction Millage to include sidewalk repair as an additional component, and increase the millage rate accordingly from 2 mills to 2.125 mills. As a result, the total millage rate for an expanded "Streets and Sidewalks" Millage would represent a total combined tax obligation of \$227/year to an Ann Arbor resident with an average home (in other words, the addition of sidewalks represents an incremental increase of about \$13/year to the average home's property tax obligation).

In order to support City Council's informed decision-making regarding whether to expand the Street and Bridge Reconstruction Millage to include sidewalk repairs, City staff led a public



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engagement process designed to explore citizen sentiment on the matter. Three city-wide public meetings were held on June 23, 29, and 30; a total of seven citizens attended. Low turnout might be attributable to the timing of the meetings (immediately after completion of the school year) and lack of widespread media coverage despite the issuance of press releases and pursuit of follow-up phone calls. Fortunately, the meetings were complemented by a brief, ADA-accessible online survey available to all Ann Arbor residents from June 20-July 5, 2011, which was widely promoted through media outlets and yielded 620 responses.

Results of the public engagement process reveal that an expanded Street and Bridge Reconstruction Millage that includes sidewalk repairs could be well-received by the public, especially if supported with a thorough education and outreach program that effectively penetrates a majority of neighborhoods. The purpose of this outreach would be to **dispel myths and misunderstandings** of the proposed millage and **promote the common themes of why such a program would be beneficial** to all residents (including those without sidewalks and those who have recently replaced their sidewalks - the most frequent constituents of millage opponents, as self-identified through survey comments). It must be said that the initiation of any public outreach effort is predicated on City Council's approval, and its effectiveness could be enhanced if complemented by Council's active promotion.

The information should be delivered with an informational mailing to residents (including a letter of introduction, sidewalk millage FAQs, results of the public engagement process, etc.) followed by a series of **ward-based public meetings** (these could be "hosted" by City Councilmembers if they choose; City staff would deliver the presentation and field questions), and reinforced through **extensive information available through the City's website and promoted via media outlets.**

More detail, including key messages that could support the public outreach effort, can be found in the Discussion and Recommendations section that follows.



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Discussion and Recommendations

Results of the public engagement process around the potential to expand the Street and Bridge Reconstruction Millage to include sidewalks reveal citizen support. **In the survey, a considerable majority of residents would prefer that the City be responsible for sidewalk repairs (70.7% strongly agree/agree).** Note that approximately two-thirds of resident respondents have repaired or replaced a portion of the sidewalk adjacent to their property as a result of the sidewalk enforcement program.

This high proportion erodes by approximately ten points when citizens are asked whether they would be willing to pay an additional one-eighth mill to fund such a program, but remains a majority percentage (59.7% strongly agree/agree). Comments submitted through the survey and delivered at the public meetings reveal the reasoning for this discrepancy, which can be summarized into several recurring themes:

Those who repaired sidewalks during the recently-completed enforcement program are **reluctant to pay more** (partially through a misconception that property owners who refused to comply with the enforcement program would benefit from the millage, and partially because the improvements they completed are expected to last for years); General **skepticism** that the City would manage the program more effectively or at less cost than property owners, or concern that the City would not spend the revenue collected for sidewalks, on sidewalks;
Sentiment that **taxes are already too high** or should be **allocated differently**;
Dissatisfaction with **street conditions**, paired with disgruntlement regarding the **sidewalk ramp replacements**, which are seen as unnecessary, costly, and uncoordinated.

These concerns are balanced by comments indicating support, which reflect the following themes:

Sidewalks are a **public good** and basic infrastructure that is enjoyed by everyone, and it seems correct that everyone should contribute to keeping them in good repair;
Residents would enjoy **advantages of having the City manage** the sidewalk repairs (for example: competitive pricing; improved quality/consistency, coordination, and follow-up; less inconvenience and hassle for individual property owners);
A millage would **increase the equity among property owners** when it comes to maintaining this public asset.



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Other comments:

A few provided suggestions for **alternative ways to structure the millage** (assess all properties equally rather than based on property value, assess millage only to properties with sidewalks, etc.);

Expressed dissatisfaction with the conditions of streets, existence of bike paths, management of the sidewalk enforcement program, etc.;

Several expressed a preference to **expand existing sidewalk infrastructure** (one commenter stated a preference not to expand);

Encouraged the City to **separate the two issues** of streets and sidewalks;

Discussed additional topics, which are included in the “miscellaneous statements” section.

Comments provide valuable insight into the attributes of a sidewalk millage that citizens find appealing, and those deserving greater clarity or explanation. Key messages, then, can begin to be extracted and developed to deliver the critical information to citizens, should the City determine to pursue a millage that incorporates sidewalk repairs. These include:

The current sidewalk enforcement program is officially “closed.” All properties will be brought up to a common level of safety and quality by the end of this year.

For public presentation purposes, ward maps with detailed information on where problem sidewalks persist, and the plan for their correction, should be included.

The reason a low millage rate is possible at this time is directly attributable to significant investment of property owners over the past 6 years; if these repairs had not been completed, the millage rate would need to be markedly higher. In other words, property owners have made a “down payment” on the sidewalks to reduce the amount required to complete ongoing repairs in the future.

Those who have replaced sidewalks in the past will not be reimbursed.

Sidewalks are not static - over time, even those that have been recently replaced will shift and crack.

As a city, we must collaboratively consider options for keeping sidewalks in good repair in the future.

The addition of sidewalks to the Street Reconstruction Millage presents one option, which was favorably received during public engagement process. The process also yielded many useful comments and suggestions.



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The City's budget for the next two years does not include resources allocated to another cycle of the recently-completed sidewalk inspection and enforcement program; rather, faulty sidewalks will be addressed on a complaint basis.

A sidewalk millage would present certain advantages over the previous program.

"Complete Streets" philosophy: why it makes sense to consider streets and sidewalks as part of a holistic transportation system.

Sidewalks are a public good that is enjoyed by all (even those without sidewalks).

Millage funding would increase equity among property owners.

Millage funding would ease the burden of large, unexpected sidewalk replacement costs to all residents.

The City could manage large projects at once, leveraging economies of scale to enable higher quality and consistency of construction at competitive pricing, and minimizing construction inconvenience/disruption to residents.

Clarity on millage level and tax implications for property owners.

Despite building into the survey a narrative explanation describing the incremental cost of adding sidewalks to the Street Reconstruction Millage, a handful of survey commenters displayed a misunderstanding of the cost (most indicating they thought the full \$227/year would be required to fund the sidewalks, rather than the incremental addition of \$13 to the existing \$214 allocated to streets).

Detailed plan on how the new program would be implemented.

Treatment of: properties within the Downtown Development Area as well as other commercial establishments; non-profits, religious entities, and University of Michigan; condominiums.

The timing, process, and staffing structure that would yield effective, timely inspection and repair (including how sidewalk repairs would coordinate with scheduled improvements such as street reconstruction, ADA ramp replacements).

That the existing standards that trigger needed repairs would remain the same.

Whether sidewalk expansions would be considered for inclusion.

How accountability will be ensured: how to demonstrate that the money intended for sidewalks, goes to sidewalks.

How the City Code would change if the millage were enacted: will liability for City and property owners change?

Expected administrative costs associated with program.



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If time permits, miscellaneous concerns could also be addressed: why sidewalk ramps have needed to be replaced, for example, and what upcoming Street Reconstruction projects are planned. (Aside: could signs be posted on streets where reconstructions are planned? e.g., "Total street reconstruction planned in 2012.")

Public Meeting Summary

Three public meetings were held (June 23, 29, 30); seven citizens attended. Two citizens were opposed to the sidewalk millage; three were in support; one was undecided. There were markedly few questions and comments on the Street Reconstruction Millage; discussion centered largely on the sidewalk issue, and included the following comments:

How will DDA area, other commercial properties be treated?

Consider permeable surfaces for sidewalks

How will new program be implemented: will there be a cycle of inspections similar to the recently-completed enforcement program?

Will the additional 1/8 mill be dedicated to sidewalks? Accountability is a concern; however, understand the need for flexibility from year to year (majority of attendees indicate preference for combined millage with good accountability)

Greater detail on street millage fund balance policy and how committed/uncommitted dollars break down in street millage accounting per new City Council methodology

A millage approach would increase equity among property owners

Sidewalks are basic infrastructure - they are part of what it means to live in a city; what your property taxes mean in an urban area

If the millage passes, would that trigger an ordinance change?

Safety concerns with uneven sidewalks

Would rather just not deal with sidewalks at all - prefer to have City manage

Don't *want* to pay more taxes but would be willing to pay for sidewalks

Often sidewalk heaving is caused by City trees; seems right that City would handle



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Emphasize the importance of public education on the issue - important to get the word out

City management could be less expensive, more efficient, enable better coordination

What would happen to administrative costs?

Concern that millage level will be insufficient - citizen expectations could increase once City is responsible

Caution that the millage will receive resistance from properties without sidewalks

Must bring noncompliant property owners into compliance before millage is enacted

Value of home will cause inequity of payment/contribution - if your home is more expensive, you'll be paying for

If program is enacted, entering into contract with citizens - fixing every sidewalk that needs it in 5 years. Is the City capable of making that commitment? Can follow through given revenue stream?

What are comparable cities' approaches?

Concern that streets remain number one priority

Perception vs. data - streets *seem* much worse than the data suggest

Utility disruptions immediately following street reconstructions are wasteful and disappointing.

Perception of extremely uneven evaluation of the sidewalks throughout the city. A small crack on one flag may have been tagged for replacement while flagrant trip hazards on other blocks were ignored.

"Lack of credibility" with the city's sidewalk enforcement. Enforcement seems to be lacking or extremely delayed at non-compliant properties.

Desire to be reimbursed for costs incurred, especially if the repairs were done recently. (Response: the first 5-year cycle of sidewalk inspections/repairs provides equity for the homeowners. The next cycle could be financed for future repairs through a millage strategy.)

The full street and sidewalk millage public survey results are provide online at www.a2gov.org/StreetMillage.