



MEMORANDUM

TO: Milton Dohoney, Jr. City Administrator

FROM: Missy Stults, Sustainability and Innovations Director

DATE: August 22, 2022

RE: Results from Sidewalk Expansion and Maintenance Discussion with Liaisons from the City's Transportation Commission, Energy Commission, Commission on Disability Issues, Environmental Commission, and A²ZERO Ambassadors

CC: Nick Hutchinson, Raymond Hess, Josh Landefeld, Remy Long

SUMMARY

On August 5th, City staff convened eight (8) liaisons from the Transportation Commission, Energy Commission, Commission on Disability Issues, Environmental Commission, and A²ZERO Ambassadors to discuss opportunities around sidewalk expansion and maintenance. Overall, participants expressed appreciation for how the City evaluates, maintains, and expands sidewalks. Attendees also identified seven main thematic areas where the city's work on sidewalk expansion and maintenance could be enhanced: a) transparency and communication; b) balancing concerns and competing priorities; c) collaboration with adjacent property owners; d) spacing and comfort; e) winter maintenance; f) education; and g) enforcement. To address many of these opportunities, city staff will host an internal meeting to share findings and explore pathways to deeper collaboration, especially regarding transparency and communication, collaboration with adjacent property owners, education, and enforcement.

BACKGROUND

On July 18, 2022 Ann Arbor City Council directed the City Administrator, via R-22-241 to convene interested representatives from the City's Environmental Commission, Transportation Commission, Energy Commission, Commission on Disability Issues, and A²ZERO Ambassadors, along with relevant staff, to identify opportunities for greater coordination between the City's transportation, safety, and sustainability initiatives as it relates to sidewalk expansion and maintenance. In response, on July 22nd, city staff sent an email to all representatives of the commissions noted above to invite them to share their feedback and join a discussion on August 5th. In total, four (4) liaisons from the Transportation Commission, two (2) from the Commission on Disability Issues, one (1) from the Energy Commission, and one (1) A²ZERO Ambassador joined the August 5th meeting, as well as two City Council members and seven (7) city staff. Two additional individuals (one A²ZERO Ambassador and one Transportation Commissioner) shared written or verbal feedback in advance of the meeting.

The agenda for the meeting on the 5th can be found in Appendix 1.

RESULTS

The August 5th conversation centered the idea of maintaining functional sidewalks where human movement is not restricted. With that centering, the discussion focused on two thematic areas: a) things that are working well regarding sidewalk expansion and maintenance and b) opportunities for improvement. For things working well, attendees noted appreciation for:

- The maintenance program which is helping address sidewalk concerns.
- Making improvements in one area of the City at a time.

- Having sidewalks and paths— sometimes the City’s infrastructure is taken for granted, especially in comparison to many other places that lack the infrastructure we have.
- Timeliness with which repairs are made --- even in winter.
- Responsiveness of city staff.
- Transition to thinking about sidewalks as an individual responsibility to a shared asset.
- The connective tissue that our sidewalks provide for our community, helping connect us and the places we enjoy.

In terms of opportunities for enhancement or improvement, eight main themes emerged:

- **Transparency and Communication.** Attendees had numerous suggestions that were already being done by staff. In responding to those suggestions, staff realized an opportunity to share their work more transparently with the public, including existing work related to: how sidewalks get prioritized for improvement or replacement; what’s included in the prioritization framework for sidewalk replacement; visualization tools denoting where sidewalk work is taking place and/or planned; and the city’s criteria and specifications for sidewalk improvements. Much of this information already lives on the City’s website but staff are looking for additional ways to make people aware of these resources: <https://www.a2gov.org/departments/engineering/Pages/Sidewalk-and-Ramp-Repair-Program.aspx>.
- **Balancing Concerns and Competing Priorities.** A few attendees discussed how conflicts often exist with use of the right of way, including, but not limited to differing concerns for the preservation of trees, preserving parking, getting a sidewalk, promoting safe routes to school, encouraging non-motorized transportation, ensuring accessibility for all users, and supporting native plantings. To address these concerns, attendees suggested creating a prioritization framework to help identify and navigate these potential conflicts. A few attendees also suggested that Council formally adopt clear priorities that help staff navigate conflicts (one example was a policy statement that the City would preserve trees over parking when creating or expanding sidewalks).
- **Collaboration with Adjacent Property Owners.** This topic branched into two primary areas: 1) working with property owners to manage their own property to avoid things like water pooling and icing in winter and managing vegetation so it does not impair sightlines and 2) working with property owners to navigate conflicts in advance of sidewalk deployment. Attendees noted that staff already do a great deal of work to engage with local property owners to navigate potential conflict so a framework for doing this portion of work already exists. Addressing the first point around collaboration with property owners could be integrated with education opportunity below.
- **Spacing and Comfort.** When building or expanding sidewalks, attendees encouraged staff to make sure these sidewalks are welcoming and comfortable to use. This includes ensuring proper distance between the roadway and the sidewalk, especially on things like bridges. It also includes making sidewalk usage more engaging and fun through things such as installing art prints into the sidewalk or putting quotes directly into the sidewalks. The idea was to make sidewalks comfortable, safe, and fun.
- **Winter Maintenance.** A few attendees emphasized the importance of ensuring individuals have access to sidewalks year-round. This included continuing conversations on how we can expand, grow, and become better with winter maintenance. And it includes working with residents to manage space adjacent to the sidewalks to prevent water pooling and icing over on the sidewalks (in alignment with recommendation related to collaboration with adjacent property owners).
- **Education.** Attendees discussed the need to work with property owners to ensure they understand their responsibility when it comes to sidewalk maintenance. This includes things like keeping the sidewalks clear (e.g., of cars, rubbish bins), ensuring vegetation does not block sightlines, and preventing water pooling on sidewalks due to adjacent grass or vegetation build up. A broad and regularly occurring education campaign focused on property owner responsibilities related to sidewalks was recommended.
- **Enforcement.** Lastly, attendees discussed the importance of enforcing the existing rules and codes – especially regarding when violations infringe on the safety of sidewalk users.

While those were the primary areas of consensus, attendees did discuss the need to move past fighting on whether we install sidewalks and focus on the strong community support for Complete Streets and sidewalk expansion, as evidenced by the passing of the Sidewalk Millage. The sentiment expressed was that the majority of community members support sidewalk expansion and maintenance, and this should be a catalyst to filling gaps.

Next Steps

Building on this feedback, staff are proposing a meeting of internal stakeholders such as community standards, engineering, transportation, sustainability, and community engagement to identify ways to enhance transparency and communication about existing activities with the public, support broad community education, and support, where needed, the enforcement team with ensuring the safety of sidewalk users.

Appendix 1: Annotated Agenda

August 5th, 2022

2pm EST

- Welcome and review purpose of meeting (per charge noted in resolution)
- Overview of how sidewalks are funded and prioritized
- Discussion of things working well related to sidewalk expansion and maintenance
- Discussion of opportunities for greater coordination related to sidewalk expansion and maintenance
- Other thoughts related to sidewalk expansion and maintenance
- Closing and next steps