



Environmental Considerations for Sidewalk Gap Filling Projects



City of Ann Arbor forestry department

Why are filling sidewalk gaps important to the City of Ann Arbor?

Ann Arbor's *Moving Together Towards Vision Zero* plan (Vision Zero), which is centered on **eliminating traffic-related fatalities and serious injuries**, outlines strategies for creating a safe, inclusive, and vibrant community for everyone, whether walking, biking, driving, or taking transit. Vision Zero identifies complete sidewalk networks as a key strategy. Additionally, sidewalks **encourage non-vehicle modes of travel**, a core strategy to reduce carbon emissions in Ann Arbor's climate action plan, *A²ZERO*.

As Vision Zero is implemented, the city remains committed to preserving and enhancing our urban tree canopy in accordance with the Forest Management Plan, addressing infrastructure needs like eliminating sidewalk gaps, and reducing single occupancy vehicle travel. **These efforts are part of a holistic vision that reflects Ann Arbor: sustainability, equity, and a high quality of life for all.**

What is the sidewalk gap filling program?

In 2020 Ann Arbor voters approved a sidewalk millage, or tax, to be used exclusively for sidewalk gap filling projects. Sidewalk gaps are filled based on a prioritization system, which considers factors like proximity to schools and transit, equity, community support, and safety. Each project goes through three phases: 1) Project selection; 2) Project Design/ Public Engagement; and 3) Project Construction. The millage will expire at the end of fiscal year 2026. As of February 2026, there are ~138 miles of sidewalk gaps remaining.¹ If the millage is not renewed, the cost of building sidewalks will fall to the owner of the adjacent property. Sidewalk construction costs typically range from \$280 to \$625 dollars per foot of sidewalk depending on the complexity of design and other factors.



How are trees protected during sidewalk gap filling projects?

Trees are a vital part of the city – managing stormwater, supporting ecosystem health, and improving the quality of life to name a few. Street trees, which are trees located in the right-of-way, are city-owned assets, and their preservation is a priority. Once a new sidewalk project has been selected, **environmental impacts, including street trees, are carefully considered during the design and construction phases.**

[1] Visit <https://www.a2gov.org/engineering/new-sidewalks-faq/> for more information on new sidewalks including a sidewalk gap dashboard.

How are trees protected during sidewalk gap filling projects? Continued...

Project Design. Engineering and Forestry staff work closely on initial design considerations, and make every effort to avoid tree removal. The team conducts a thorough site visit, where every potentially impacted tree is carefully evaluated, considering things like tree health, ecological benefit, root zones, and whether the tree is a landmark tree. Identified impacts are then addressed through project design, public engagement, and/or project mitigation:

- **Design Approach:** Solutions to retain trees might include **curving sidewalks, adjusting curbs to work around trees, or securing an easement** from the adjacent property owner to allow sidewalk placement.²
- **Public engagement:** Community feedback is paramount. Residents are invited to get involved early, via public meetings, guided site walks, online project pages, and email updates. This input shapes decisions and helps build public support. Residents whose properties are directly adjacent to the project area – plus two blocks in either direction – are sent a postcard to invite them to provide feedback.
- **Tree mitigation:** **Sometimes sidewalks cannot be designed to avoid all trees.** In these cases, the trees must be removed, and the focus turns to mitigation. A canopy loss fee of \$250 per diameter inch is charged for removal of a city-owned tree, with the fee amount reviewed and adjusted annually. For city projects, this money transfers from the sidewalk millage to the stormwater utility and reinvested in planting new street trees and maintaining existing canopy in accordance with the Forest Management Plan. This ensures that necessary canopy loss is mitigated and long-term urban forest goals remain protected.



Example of an alternative design approach that curves the sidewalk around multiple existing street trees.

Project Construction. The city works with project-adjacent residents as needed to minimize potential impacts to private property. Trees that are to be saved are marked with “tree protection” fencing to alert contractors and city inspectors that are on-site during construction to avoid placing equipment or traversing through the area protected by fencing. Post-construction, vegetation in the public right-of-way is restored in accordance with the city’s Standard Specifications, which allow for both turf grass and native plants.



Example of a curving sidewalk and an allowance for a narrower greenspace (<3 ft) between curb and sidewalk.

[2] All alternatives are thoroughly evaluated before a decision is made. City staff weigh engineering feasibility, cost, safety, accessibility requirements, and tree preservation to determine the most appropriate design.

