

Sidewalk Repair in Providence

These notes are based on some informal research by
Jeremy Giller and Heather Johnson, Ward 3 residents.

What's up with our city's sidewalks?

The city has about 600 miles of sidewalks and about 100 miles of streets with no sidewalks at all. Providence's **Department of Public Works (DPW)** has a long list of requests to fix sidewalks all over the city, but very little money to do it. DPW fixes a few when they have the money, but some requests have been sitting for *more than 10 years*.

What makes sidewalks break?

Two main causes: (1) tree roots grow underneath them and force the sidewalks up, and (2) the freeze-and-thaw cycle of changing seasons (like the dreaded potholes).

Okay...so has anyone tried to do something?

In August 2014, the **Providence City Council** passed a resolution, introduced by Councilman Sam Zurier, asking for a report from DPW about unrepaired sidewalks. <http://bit.ly/2syPp4F>

Highlights from DPW's October 2014 **Report**

Regarding Sidewalk Conditions: <http://bit.ly/2syZ8rE>

- more than 5,000 sidewalk complaints are on file at DPW, and some have been repaired.
- it would cost about *\$20 million* to fix the rest of the sidewalks on the list
- DPW knows that there are many more sidewalks that need repair that aren't on their list
- For Ward 3, the list includes 237 repaired sidewalks and 568 not repaired. Fewer than 30% of Ward 3 requests and complaints had been resolved.
- DPW suggests that they review ALL of the city's sidewalks (estimated to cost \$150,000)
- DPW suggests that places where sidewalks are used most should be fixed first, and that they should fix larger stretches of sidewalk at once to save money
- DPW has started to work with the City Forester to make sure the new trees planted in the city are less likely to create sidewalk problems in the future

So is there any money at all for sidewalks?

We don't have enough money to fix the sidewalks or even a current list of which sidewalks need fixing the most. There are companies that could be paid to do this kind of survey. That would use up a lot of the immediate money we have for fixing sidewalks, but maybe is a smart investment to understand the problem and make a long-term plan.

How do I report a broken sidewalk?

To file a request for repair, contact Providence 3-1-1, the city's channel to file any request for any city services. You can go to <http://www.providenceri.gov/pvd-311/>, call 3-1-1 (M-F; 8:30a-4:30p), or download the PVD311 app on your mobile phone.

Sidewalks are the responsibility of the **Department of Public Works' Highway and Sewer Divisions**. Their phone number is 401.467.7950.

A lot of major building improvements are paid through bond issues. Voters approved a \$40 million bond issue in 2016, but the City Council and the Mayor couldn't agree on how the bond should be spent, so it was declared invalid.

There is a new \$45 million bond is being considered by the Council now. The mayor introduced a capital that is being considered by the Council. It proposes spending \$1.75 million per year on sidewalks for each of the next 5 years. For the first two years that money would come from the bond the council is considering.

DPW says it fixes sidewalks that are the biggest safety hazards first, and that it's more cost-effective to repair a whole stretch of sidewalk than just one or two houses here and there. Some neighbors say that clustering complaints along one street has helped them get attention from DPW, too. But clustering can mean some streets will get most of the repairs while others wait.

Without enough money to fix the problem, DPW has to decide how to spend the money it has. Should they divide the bond money equally by ward? Should they focus on the areas of the city with the biggest number of safety hazards?

Providence isn't the only place with broken sidewalks. What do other cities do?

The truth: they struggle too. In some cities, they have tried to design new kinds of sidewalks that are less damaged by growing trees. But in a lot of cities it comes down to not having enough money. For example, in cities like Seattle, Philadelphia, New York, Minneapolis, and Memphis, property owners are responsible for fixing their own sidewalks. Many of these cities have incentives and penalties for homeowners related to sidewalk maintenance. In some cities, the cost is split based on factors like who owns the tree or who owns the sewer. In Seattle, for example, assigning responsibility for the sidewalk repair was step one. A temporary tax (2005-15) paid for city repairs, but prioritizing the neediest sidewalks still took a lot of work.

Seattle: <http://www.seattle.gov/transportation/sidewalkrepair.htm>

Philadelphia: <http://www.phillymag.com/citified/2016/01/19/fix-our-sidewalks/>

So what can we do?

Well, we don't see an easy solution. But there is power in numbers and community. Some ideas:

- Work together to make our own list of the sidewalks in our one square mile ward that need repair and help DPW prioritize which ones need fixing most.
- Advocate together for what we think is the best use of the city's limited funds.
- A tool for the public to track the progress of filed complaints could bring transparency to the sidewalk repair process. Is there a community partner who could help with this?
- We can follow up with the City Council and DPW on the 2014 report, their budget, and their priorities for Ward 3.
- We can keep learning—we know these notes are just a start.