

## The State of Sidewalks in Providence

Nat Hardy and Kath Connolly for the Office of City Councilor Helen Anthony *July 2021*

Many people are drawn to Providence's wonderful historic architecture. But along with the incredible structures from pre-Revolutionary times, comes antiquated infrastructure including water, sewer, sidewalks and road beds. Many of the routes we use to navigate our city by foot, car, or bike are in need of repair, and sidewalks are a frequent topic of concern.

This white paper includes the following sections:

- [Our Sidewalk System](#)
- [Summary of the 2019 StreetScan Sidewalk Report](#)
- [How are Sidewalks Repaired?](#)
- [What are our Options?](#)

### Our Sidewalk System

#### What is the scale of Providence's sidewalk system?

Providence has 625 miles of sidewalk, and there are 26 miles of residential streets in our city that do not have sidewalks at all.

#### What about Ward 2?

Ward 2 has the third highest volume of sidewalks, with 54.4 miles of sidewalk in our neighborhoods -- a total of 1.7 million square feet of sidewalk. Ward 2 has 80,000 s.f. of roads without any sidewalks at all -- ranking third in the city for the amount of area with no sidewalks.

#### What causes sidewalks to break down?

Sidewalks break and shift over time for two main reasons:

1. Weather -- particularly freeze-thaw cycles. When water beneath the sidewalk freezes in the winter, it expands, disrupting the sidewalk's underlying structure and causing cracks. This phenomena is similar to the one that causes our roads to develop potholes.
2. Tree root growth that disrupts the sidewalk structure. To learn more about how sidewalks get broken, see [Garden Guide's What Causes a Crack in a Sidewalk?](#)

#### We can't control the weather, so what do we know about Providence's street trees?

In 2008 the City Forestry department issued a [State of Providence's Urban Forest](#) report. The report included data from a comprehensive citywide tree inventory conducted in 2006, including:

- 24,999 street trees were identified
- 27.6% of trees had cracked or raised sidewalks adjacent to them

- 16.2% of trees had some sort of infrastructure conflict threatening their health, the leading conflict being close sidewalk pavement.
- Average sidewalk tree pit size is approximately 16 square feet. For new plantings, the forestry department currently specifies a *minimum* tree pit size of 24 square feet.
- Over 3,000 trees conflict with adjacent pavement, meaning they have no room to grow.
- The Norway maple is our dominant tree species (19%), down from 47% in 1988. The Norway maple is noted for contributing to heaving sidewalks and is no longer planted.

### **What has been done to advocate for repair of Providence’s sidewalks?**

**2014:** Ward 2 City Councilman Sam Zurier [requested a report on the status of repair of the city’s sidewalks](#), noting that DPW maintains a list of requests with thousands of entries, some more than a decade old. The resolution suggested the city explore floating a bond for sidewalk repair.

**2014:** [A report to the Providence City Council regarding Sidewalk Conditions](#) from the Department of Public Works was finalized in October. The report found 3,404 sidewalk repair requests had not yet been addressed, and estimated those repairs would cost \$20 million.

**2017:** When Ward 3 Councilwoman Nirva LaFortune was running for office, her campaign issued a [summary of the state of sidewalks](#). The report summarized attempts to repair our sidewalks, and outlined some approaches used by other U.S. cities.

**2017:** The City of Providence commissioned StreetScan, a professional mapping company, to evaluate the city’s 625 miles of sidewalks by walking the streets with digital scanners, creating detailed data on the materials and condition of the city’s sidewalks. The scanners captured fine details like the location of cracks, holes, and raised sections of sidewalk.

**2019:** StreetScan’s survey was summarized in a report, *Sidewalk Survey for Providence, RI - StreetScan Findings*, in January 2019. This comprehensive analysis of sidewalk conditions equipped the city with a better understanding of the scale of the problem and data to guide prioritizing repair. Those findings summarized in the next section of this paper.

**2019:** In March, the City Council passed a resolution directing National Grid and other utilities to work cooperatively with the DPW to coordinate road and sidewalk repair.

**2020:** To maximize limited financial resources, Providence developed the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP), which charts five years of planned infrastructure improvements based on reports from all city departments. The CIP allows for better coordination of work with outside agencies, like utility companies, and alignment with priorities including emergency management, plans for parks, and the goals in [Providence Tomorrow](#), a master plan approved in November 2014.

The latest [Capital Improvement Plan \(CIP\)](#) covers FY 2020 – 2024. This plan proposes \$12 million of funding for sidewalk repair over 5 years. Funds to support this plan need to be approved in each budget cycle, so just because items are included in the CIP does not mean that the budget is there to carry out that work.

# Summary of the 2019 StreetScan Sidewalk Report

The 2019 StreetScan survey offered the most detailed overview to date of our sidewalks.

All sidewalks were rated on a scale of 1 to 10:

- 0-2 = sidewalk has failed
  - 2-5 = sidewalk in poor condition
  - 6-8 = sidewalk in fair condition
  - 8-10 = sidewalk in good condition
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- The average sidewalk condition rating was 6.6 or fair condition -- damaged but still functional.
  - 27% of Providence's sidewalks were in "good" condition
  - 23% of the city's sidewalks were "poor" or "failed," a total of 150 miles of sidewalk.
  - 4% of Providence's streets had no sidewalk at all.

## How do sidewalk conditions in different wards compare?

Ward 1 had the highest average rating for sidewalks, and Ward 7 had the lowest.

Area	Average Rating
City-wide average	6.6
Ward 1	7.1
Ward 2	6.5
Ward 7	6.0

## What were the major conclusions of the 2019 report?

The report concluded that:

- 59% of all sidewalks (386 miles of sidewalk) were in need of partial replacement
- 6% of all sidewalks (41 miles) were in need of total reconstruction.
- 10% of all sidewalks (64 miles) were in need of patch repair
- 3% of all sidewalks (18 miles) were in need of grinding (an option to level uneven sidewalks)

78% of the city's sidewalks were identified as needing some level of attention. In 2019, the report estimated the cost to implement the suggested repairs at \$140 -170 million.

Estimated repair costs for Ward 2 were the second highest of any ward (due to a combination of miles of sidewalk and below average condition), estimated at \$12.6 million. Constructing sidewalks on Ward 2's streets that have no sidewalks would cost an additional \$1.5 million.

## Are there other cost factors to consider?

In addition to the cost of repair, there is staffing. There was a dedicated staff person at DPW who oversaw sidewalk complaints, repair crews and repair priorities, but that position no longer exists. The Department of Public Works has one crew dedicated to concrete work in the city and if another crew is short-staffed, they get diverted to other projects.

In addition to repair costs, there is the cost of inaction. Each year numerous claims are filed against the city for injuries sustained by pedestrians due to sidewalk conditions.

## How are Sidewalks Repaired?

The 2019 StreetScan report informed planning and budgeting at DPW and the data has enabled them to more accurately prioritize needed sidewalk repair.

There are many more requests for sidewalk repair than there are funds to repair them. The [Capital Improvement Plan](#) requests \$3M per year for sidewalks, and that is not nearly enough.

The Department of Public Works uses a number of factors to prioritize sidewalk repair:

- Proximity to high use public facilities such as schools, recreation centers or libraries
- Proximity to hospitals or other emergency care facilities
- Level of pedestrian traffic, favoring high traffic, commercial areas
- Clusters or “corridors” of sidewalks needing repair – areas where sending a crew to fix a lengthier area of sidewalk would maximize the investment of time and money

These priorities mean that repairs are made that will benefit the largest number of people, but unfortunately that means sidewalks on quiet residential streets and sidewalks where only one panel is deficient are lower priority. It is for this reason that many residents have submitted sidewalk repair requests to the city year after year and have seen no response. It seems unlikely that the city will have funds to prioritize these repairs in the near future.

While we don't have exact numbers, we know that thousands of sidewalk repair requests remain unanswered.

### **How do I report a broken sidewalk? Should I even bother?**

Sidewalks in need of repair, as well as other service requests can be sent through the Providence 311 system (<https://www.providenceri.gov/pvd-311/>). Many residents have repeatedly reported a needed sidewalk repair to 311 over many years with no action. 311 is the only reliable source of data on complaints, so even though it is not necessarily a solution, it does help show the need for attention to the issue.

## What Are Our Options?

The main obstacle standing in the way of sidewalk repair is funding. In our research we identified several different ways that communities are funding sidewalk repair:

- Some cities, including Philadelphia, Austin, and Nashville, cover the full cost of sidewalk repair. But as this [Philadelphia Inquirer commentary points out](#), that doesn't mean that sidewalks are actually getting repaired.

- Other cities are making sidewalk maintenance and repair the full responsibility of the property owner, including New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Seattle, New Orleans, and Pittsburgh. But sometimes the ordinances are not enforced, or property owners cannot afford, or refuse to complete, the required repairs.
- Some communities have created programs where the city shares the cost of sidewalk repair with property owners. Cities like [Chicago](#), [San Diego](#), [Berkeley](#), and locally, [Pawtucket](#) and [Cranston](#), all have cost-share programs to cover sidewalk repairs. The rates vary in each city, with some municipalities covering a specific dollar amount per square foot of sidewalk, and others covering 50% of the total repair cost.
- Other cities, like Denver, have more targeted approaches. Denver subsidizes repair costs for low-income property owners. In Ithaca, NY all property owners contribute a small amount annually to cover sidewalk repairs specifically for their neighborhood.
- More information about these community-based sidewalk funding initiatives can be found in the [Sidewalk Repair Funding Guide created by Minnesota Walks](#).

### **How has the Providence City Council tried to respond to the cost of sidewalk repair?**

We don't know the whole history of the city's work on sidewalks, but at one point Providence did have a sidewalk cost share program. Recently several proposals have been introduced to implement some version of cost share:

- In 2016 Councilman Brian Principe [introduced a resolution](#) encouraging the city to examine a plan to allow property owners to repair sidewalks and deduct the cost from their taxes. The resolution passed, but to our knowledge, no further action was taken.
- In 2018 Councilman Sam Zurier introduced an ordinance to implement a cost sharing program for sidewalk repairs ([Ordinance 17893](#)) that would use city funds to subsidize homeowners interested in repairing their sidewalks. The proposal suggested that 50% of the costs would be covered by the city, with higher rates of municipal contribution for low-income residents. This ordinance was referred to committee and never passed.

### **Are there any other options?**

Some residents have repaired the sidewalk in front of their house themselves. This involves [getting a permit from the city and hiring a contractor licensed to perform the work](#). The Department of Public Works wants to ensure that any private work on public sidewalks adheres to [the city's standards for repair](#).

### **Where do we go from here?**

One option that residents of Ward 2 might explore is working together to bid out a whole series of residential sidewalk repairs across the ward to a private contractor. If residents pooled the work, the contractor might offer a better price. Residents might also appeal to the city to waive the permitting fees if enough residents were willing to pursue the repair themselves.