

How Do We *Pay* for Sidewalks (and Other Infrastructure)?

Funding Healthier Places for Walking and Cycling: 7 Strategies

By Mark Fenton

Communities across North America use a variety of strategies to finance pedestrian and bicycle network improvements. The most successful communities do not appear to rely on just one funding source, but creatively utilize a mix of tools and approaches depending on their state or province, to make both immediate and long-term progress on their facility needs.

First is a summary list of seven possible approaches; they are then outlined in further detail below, with some relevant contact information.

Important Note. The recommended standard for sidewalks is a five-foot minimum width, with a planting strip or other separation from the roadway (preferably two feet or more) when possible. A six-inch vertical curb is preferred to assure vehicles do not park on the walkway, and it's absolutely mandatory if the sidewalk is at the curb edge to enhance safety by providing at least some separation between pedestrians and traffic. Similar guidelines can be found for trails, crosswalks, and bicycle lanes. Start at www.pedbikeinfo.org.

1. **Routine accommodation.** Require complete streets, accommodating pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit riders on absolutely all new construction and redevelopment.
2. **Opportunistic improvement.** Build sidewalks at reduced cost during other construction activities (sewers, underground utility work, road resurfacing).
3. **Mitigation and impact fees for new development.** Require all proposed developments to study the full transportation impacts of a project. In other words, not just motor-vehicle traffic impacts, but also pedestrian, bicycle, and transit travel modes. Then either:
 - a. Require the developer to construct non-motorized facilities (e.g. sidewalks bike lanes, trails) to nearby, off-site destinations (schools, shopping, etc.) to mitigate those impacts. Or . . .

- b. Charge development impact fees to mitigate the impacts through improved pedestrian, bicycle, and transit facilities.

4. Grant Programs and transportation funds. Utilize state and federal resources. E.g.

- The Transportation Enhancements (TE) Program.
- Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funds
- Transit Oriented Development grants.
- Safe Routes to School program
- Highway safety funds of the Surface Transportation program
- Recreational Trail funds; Greenways and Trails Demonstration Grants.

5. Betterments, Special Improvement Districts, Tax Increment Financing. Charge adjacent property owners, or a general neighborhood or business district for construction or improvement of sidewalks, trail, bicycle parking, or other facilities based on the need and increased access and value for those landowners.

6. Special funding & resources. Foundations, corporate sponsorships, service groups, and adopt-a-trail and “friends” organizations can all provide funding or in-kind support for creation or maintenance of facilities such as trails, paths, and open space. This can include funding endowments for the long-term maintenance of facilities.

7. Capital improvements. Many cities and towns have a small but regular portion of the budget annually dedicated to sidewalk, pathway, and bike lane construction and maintenance.

But most importantly, when considering these seven strategies, it is vital that your community develops a plan. Most successful communities first invest in an inventory of current facilities and needs. They then develop a non-motorized network plan, which includes an assessment of priorities, often engaging a professional planning and design firm in the process. Such outside professional assistance can be valuable in four ways:

- First, planners and transportation engineers have somewhat sophisticated means of assessing the potential demand for non-motorized travel in an area based on the nature of trip generators (schools, churches shopping), proximity of other uses (residential clusters) and facilities that might be

installed, such as sidewalks, crossings, and bike lanes. Some of these facilities--say, a signalized mid-block crossing--require somewhat specialized design skills in the pedestrian/bicycle field to conceive properly.

- Second, a private firm can dispassionately set priorities, avoiding the political pressures that might be-devil a community-based group. This is not to suggest that anyone would act in bad faith, but it simply avoids anyone ending up in the challenging position of telling neighbors their sidewalk is low on the priority list.
- Third, grant applications are often reviewed more favorably when they are part of a plan, rather than as simply stand-alone projects.
- Fourth, good firms can also provide very good insight and recommendations on sources of funding for the high priority projects on the plan.

7 Strategies in Detail:

1. **Routine accommodation.** Critical to assuring a town ends up with a complete network of sidewalks, every board (but especially planning, zoning, and city council) have to make it standard practice that absolutely all new construction and redevelopment have sidewalks and trails that will tie into the current *and future* network of facilities in town. Successful towns establish an unwavering consistency on this, or the system will never truly be complete.
2. **Opportunistic improvement.** During any maintenance, upgrades, or other infrastructure work proximal to the roadways or utility corridors many towns make it a matter of course to repair and upgrade existing sidewalks, bicycle lanes, and trails, or to install missing sections. This includes such work as sewers, underground utilities, power line corridors, and even routine road resurfacing, because the marginal cost of sidewalk installation and repair is much less when there is work already being done in the right-of-way.
3. **Off-site mitigation for new development.** Increasingly communities are requiring new developments to construct sidewalk facilities outside the actual boundaries of development if there is a likely negative transportation impact resulting from that development. For example, a new housing development that is within the "no bus service" radius of a school and lacking a sidewalk connection to that school will clearly cause an adverse increase in the

number of motor vehicles dropping off and picking up students at the school; many parents simply won't allow a child to walk in the roadway. This is an estimable negative impact on the transport network, increasing congestion and reducing safety at the school. A comparable case can be made regarding housing developments proximal to other trip generators such as shopping and transit stations. In such cases, towns have required developers to complete some or all of the sidewalk, trail, or path network connecting the development to the destination to mitigate the negative impacts of the new construction.

4. **Impact fees.** All new development induces increased traffic flow that increases congestion, air and water quality impacts, wear on the roadway system, and burdens on public services (police traffic enforcement, emergency response, schools, etc.). An approach to mitigating those negative impacts is to assess a standard impact fee (say, so many dollars per 1,000 square feet of residential or business space) that is dedicated to improving the non-motorized transportation network in the community, to help remediate for those broad transportation impacts of the new development. (A portion of such fees might also be dedicated to schools and public safety, for example.) There is great benefit to having a set impact fee rate in by-laws so that the permit granting boards and developers have a clear understanding from the start of the magnitude of the anticipated fee.

5. **Grant Programs.** There are an increasing number of grant opportunities that your town can pursue to aid in funding sidewalk construction; in general applications are viewed more favorably when the proposed work is not just a "spot fix" but is part of an adopted plan for improvement, such as a community-wide sidewalk plan. Here are four examples
 - **Transit Oriented Development.** Some states have funds for building facilities that will encourage walking and cycling to transit facilities such as bus stops or train stations to ease traffic and environmental impacts of new development.
 - **Safe Routes to School.** A new federal fund, administered through the new state Safe Routes to School program through state DOT, for improvements that increase cycling and walking to schools. The total available dollars are modest but can be used for critical connections, such as improving key crossings in the sidewalk system, or to launch programs that will develop community support for further work.
 - **Transportation Enhancements Program.** Federally funded and administered through the state DOT, these often substantial grants have been used widely for construction of rail-trails and similar facilities around

the country, as well as pedestrian and bicycle improvements in critical areas such as waterfronts, near transit stations, and in or near redeveloping business districts.

- Recreational Trail funds; Greenways and Trails Demonstration Grants. Another portion of federal transportation funding typically administered through state departments of conservation or natural resources, the first provides for actual construction, the second for planning and design. These grants can be used for multi-use pathways that provide transportation, not just recreational, functions.

6. **Betterments, Special Improvement Districts, etc.** Research has established that the presence of sidewalks tends to increase adjacent property values and provide an immediate access improvement to those properties, as well as the broader public benefits of increasing non-motorized travel and reducing negative traffic impacts. As such, some communities charge the adjacent property owner or an entire area or district for the direct cost of sidewalk construction as a betterment, not unlike paying for the cost of a sewer hook-up. Like sewers and similar public works, the process is often bonded by the municipality; in some cases property owners pay back their portion over time, or if in an "improvement district" pay through a time-defined tax surcharge. Sometimes communities require that property owners cover only a portion of the cost, making the difference up with other resources listed here.
7. **Capital improvements.** Most communities have at least a modest annual budget for non-motorized facility maintenance and construction. This might include, for example, sidewalk construction, trail maintenance, crosswalk and bike lane re-painting. Though the sum might not be large, and only enough to construct several thousands or even just hundreds of feet of sidewalk per year, over time it is a significant contribution to building the network. Further, this can be an important source of funding in providing the local matching funds that may be required for grant funding (such as an enhancement grant, which typically requires at least a 10% local match). This can also be combined with charging local betterments and collected impact fees, or in concert with required mitigation work by developers, to create a more complete system of facilities.

The most important lesson from my work around the country is that the truly successful communities are taking advantage of most, if not all of these approaches.

Resources:

Technical guidance: www.pedbikeinfo.org

Safe Routes to School: www.saferoutesinfo.org

Complete Streets campaign: www.completestreets.org

Local Government Commission: www.lgc.org

Canadian Active Living & Environment campaign: www.goforgreen.ca

Victoria Transportation Policy Institute: www.vtpi.org

Active Living by Design program: www.ActiveLivingbyDesign.org