

Sidewalk Feasibility Studies and Construction Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why sidewalks?

Sidewalks are a critical element of the city's transportation network and provide a safe, comfortable and accessible route to residences and destinations in Rockville. By providing sidewalks in neighborhoods, the city can help address transportation equity to ensure that people who cannot drive automobiles, either because of cost, age or physical ability, are still able to access homes, businesses, transit facilities, recreational areas and institutions. Sidewalks, by their nature of being outside of the roadway are safer for people to traverse and provide a buffer between pedestrians and motor vehicles, which is particularly important for pedestrians who are much more vulnerable than motorists when crashes occur. Sidewalks are an important facility to help encourage more people to walk and roll and create walkable and rollable communities. Walking and rolling is a healthier travel option for people for physical and mental health, it provides more opportunity for social interaction among neighbors, and does not produce the same pollution and noise as automobiles. Additionally, communities that are walkable and rollable are more financially resilient and sustainable than those without sidewalks.

2. How are the sidewalks gaps chosen for study and construction?

The Mayor and Council approved a Sidewalk Prioritization Policy, which uses an objective set of criteria to score each missing sidewalk segment. The criteria include proximity to schools, bus stops, public recreation facilities and Metro stations; zoning districts with expected pedestrian activity; connectivity of the missing segment; whether the street has a sidewalk on the opposite side; and the street's speed limit and classification. All missing sidewalk segments are scored and categorized into five groups: Priority Group A through Priority Group E. Priority Group A are the highest priority and should be evaluated first. Group E are the lowest priority and will be evaluated after other groups. However, there are instances where lower priority sidewalks are evaluated, such as segments with public support or in response to a crash. For each of the Sidewalk Feasibility Rounds, the city chooses sidewalk segments based on the priority group, whether a sidewalk exists on one side of the street and consideration of equity across Rockville neighborhoods.

3. Does the feasibility study guarantee a sidewalk will be built?

No, not necessarily. The sidewalk feasibility study is a first step towards building sidewalks in Rockville. City staff, usually with the help of a civil engineering design consultant, conduct this study to evaluate whether a sidewalk could be constructed along the street, and to identify the projected impacts and approximate construction costs. The study includes an assessment of the availability of existing public right of way, grading impacts and the need for retaining walls, impact on existing overhead and underground utilities, impacts to stormwater drainage, existing driveways, and trees and landscaping. Sidewalks that are deemed feasible will be advanced to the design phase and ultimately constructed. Sidewalks that are deemed infeasible will be classified as such and reevaluated in the future.

4. If the street doesn't have curbs or has poor drainage, will the city improve that infrastructure at the same time?

As part of the feasibility study, the city will evaluate all necessary improvements for providing the sidewalk. This could necessitate adding new curb and gutter and installing underground pipes for drainage. Should the sidewalk segment be deemed feasible for construction, and the curb and gutter and improved drainage infrastructure are deemed necessary, those improvements would be constructed at the same time as the new sidewalk.

5. What happens if a sidewalk impacts my landscaping or trees?

The city will evaluate the impact of adding a sidewalk on existing trees and landscaping. The city will make efforts to reduce impacts to landscaping and trees, including reduction of the buffer width, narrowing the sidewalk, redirecting the sidewalk, or in some cases, using a pavement material that would not impact a tree's root system. If impacts to trees or landscaping on private property cannot be avoided, the city will discuss replacement trees or landscaping with the property owner, or appropriate compensation for the removal.

6. Will utility poles need to be moved closer to my house?

The city will evaluate impacts to utilities, including utility poles, as part of the feasibility study. In most instances, the city will seek to avoid moving an existing utility pole by routing the sidewalk around it. In other instances, it will be necessary to move the utility pole and the city will work with property owners and the utility company to relocate the pole within the public right of way or along an existing utility easement. If available right of way is not present, this effort may include the need to obtain additional right of way or an easement for the new utility pole from the adjacent property owner.

7. What if the construction of the sidewalk requires a taking of my land?

The city will make appropriate efforts to avoid acquiring additional right of way for the construction of a sidewalk by utilizing the existing right of way available. If the construction of a sidewalk is not possible without additional right of way, the city will seek an agreement with the relevant property owners for the areas of land deemed necessary.

8. There's already a sidewalk on the opposite side of the street. Does this street need two sidewalks?

There are many streets in Rockville which have a sidewalk on one side of the street, but not the other side. The recently adopted Pedestrian Master Plan indicates that "Sidewalks should be provided on both sides of all streets." Sidewalks are the most important feature in the pedestrian environment and provide a safe route separated from motor vehicle traffic. It is expected that all streets will be able to provide pedestrian access to all destinations, similar to motor vehicle travel. In many cases, it's suggested a sidewalk isn't necessary because people can use the other side of the street or walk on the grass or on the street itself. However, for many people, such as those using wheelchairs or traveling with children, walking and rolling on grass or in the street is not safe or feasible,

especially on busier streets. A single sidewalk forces people to travel indirectly and to cross the street two more times where they wouldn't otherwise. Reducing the number or times a person needs to cross makes walking and rolling a safer and more direct mode of transportation. The city recognizes that in many cases, providing a sidewalk on both sides of the street may be infeasible, because of right-of-way constraints or other issues. Streets with sidewalks missing on both sides are a criterion in the Sidewalk Prioritization Policy and a consideration by staff when selecting sidewalks for each round of sidewalk feasibility studies.

- 9. How does the city decide if a sidewalk is placed on the back of curb or if a grass buffer is included?** The city's roadway standards and details include a minimum 7-foot-wide buffer space between the curb and the sidewalk. This area is the sidewalk buffer and is usually grass and can sometimes provide areas for street trees. The buffer increases comfort for people walking and rolling and the necessary space for sidewalks to maintain the same grade at driveways, preventing people from walking/rolling up and down the driveway slope. If there is sufficient public right of way, it is preferable to provide both the sidewalk and the grass buffer. If there is insufficient right of way, the grass buffer may be eliminated or reduced in width.
- 10. Will residents need to pay a special assessment for the construction of the sidewalk?** No. A special assessment is not levied on the properties abutting the missing sidewalk segment. The feasibility study, design, and construction of a new sidewalk is funded through a dedicated budget item in the city's annual capital improvement program specifically for sidewalk construction.
- 11. Does adding sidewalks increase crime in a neighborhood by permitting people to walk closer to my home?** There is no evidence or study that indicates the presence of a sidewalk leads to additional crime along the street.
- 12. Nobody in the neighborhood walks, does this street really need a sidewalk?** Sidewalks are an important amenity and component of the transportation infrastructure for Rockville. Sidewalks serve not only the residents living in properties that are immediately adjacent to the sidewalk, but also visitors to those residences and those who may walk and roll to nearby destinations. A sidewalk provides a dedicated and separated space for people to walk and roll that is safer and more comfortable than using the street or grass. While in many neighborhoods it may seem like no one walks, there are many reasons for people to use sidewalks. This includes children and their families going to and from school, people walking, rolling and jogging for recreation or health purposes, walking dogs, letter carriers and couriers delivering packages, children trick or treating, and people using nearby bus routes. Also, people often travel to shop or commute but may not have access to an automobile or the ability to drive due to disability, age or personal preference and would use sidewalks.
- 13. Will residents be required to clear snow and ice from newly constructed sidewalks.**

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Like other sidewalks in Rockville, property owners are required to clear snow and ice from sidewalks along their property frontage. The [City Code, Chapter 5, Article XII, Division 2, Section 5-287, PM-303.3, “Public Areas.”](#) includes provisions for snow removal requirements ([link here](#)), regarding when snow needs to be cleared. Residents are also able to [sign up on the city’s website](#) for snow shoveling assistance or to volunteer to help neighbors in need.