

Sidewalks are public infrastructure—let's treat them that way!

Most municipalities in Dutchess County require property owners to maintain sidewalks that are adjacent to their property, including paying for repairs, clearing snow and ice, and keeping them clean. Some municipalities even require property owners to pay for sidewalk construction adjacent to their property. If the property owner does not perform the work in a timely manner, the municipality does the construction or maintenance and then makes the property owner pay for it. These policies are typically established in the municipality's Streets and Sidewalks code.

Why is this? Sidewalks, like streets, are used by everyone, not just the adjacent property owner. Do we require property owners to fix the street in front of their home? To clear it from snow? Or to build a new street when needed? No, we don't. So why should sidewalks be any different?

Requiring residents to pay for sidewalk repairs burdens lower-income residents and reduces the community's support for new sidewalks. In addition, when private property owners are required to maintain public infrastructure, it is usually done inconsistently. How many times have you walked down a sidewalk after a snowstorm and found it clear in some spots and un-shoveled, or poorly shoveled, in others? Can you blame the elderly resident, the neighbor with a disability, or the mom juggling multiple jobs for not clearing their stretch of sidewalk as well as a professional would?

Municipalities across the country are starting to re-think these policies, including some in New York State (see also [this report from Baltimore, MD](#)). Here are some improved sidewalk policies to consider for your community:

Plow Your Sidewalks

Many cities have developed municipal snow plowing programs. According to a [2019 Bloomberg article](#), the City of Syracuse started a pilot program to hire contractors for snow plowing. Rochester, NY plows all sidewalks after storms of more than four inches. Toronto, Ontario, Duluth, MN, and Bloomington, MN also have municipal sidewalk plowing programs. This results in more consistent and equitable plowing. In Dutchess

County, the Village of Red Hook and City of Beacon remove snow from sidewalks in their downtown areas.

Fund Sidewalk Improvements:

But how do you pay for this? Rochester's sidewalk snow plowing [is funded through a fee on property taxes](#), which is based on the property's front footage, just like they fund street cleaning and roadway snow plowing. Ithaca, NY adopted a new [sidewalk policy](#) in 2014, which funds sidewalk construction and maintenance through an annual [Sidewalk Improvement District](#) assessment, so that all properties in an area contribute to the cost of sidewalks in their district. An [interactive website](#) shows the districts and completed and planned improvements. Similar districts have been established in many downtown areas to pay for sidewalk maintenance as well as streetscape improvements like trash collection, lighting, benches, and landscaping. In Dutchess County, the Village of Pawling has a sidewalk budget that funds repairs, and the Village of Red Hook repairs sidewalks in its downtown and school areas through the street maintenance budget in its general fund.

Plan for Sidewalks:

Municipalities can also be more consistent in requiring sidewalks when land is developed or redeveloped—just as you require streets to be built as part of a new subdivision or a driveway paved as part of a new office building.

This means reviewing and updating your zoning and subdivision codes and adopting an [official map](#) or sidewalk plan to show where sidewalks should be. As an example, [Nashville, TN](#) updated its [sidewalk ordinance](#) in 2019 to require sidewalks for most new development, particularly in designated centers and along higher-traffic streets.

Regular, proactive sidewalk inspections and transparent system to prioritize repairs and new construction are also important. Reach out to us if you are interested in partnering on a local [Pedestrian Plan](#) or would like guidance on updating your codes or practices.

Most residents want walkable communities, just like they want paved roads. But quality sidewalks shouldn't depend on individual actions. Municipalities can take the lead in requiring sidewalks as part of development projects, planning for maintenance and construction, and creating funding programs to pay for needed improvements.