

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

Most municipalities in Dutchess County require property owners to maintain the sidewalks adjacent to their property, including keeping them clean, clearing snow and ice, and paying for repairs. 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 maintenance or construction 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. Why should sidewalks be any different?

In addition, when 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. Here are some sidewalk policies to consider for your community:

Maintain Public Sidewalks:

Across the country, more municipalities have started sidewalk repair programs, recognizing the importance of well-maintained sidewalks to safety, equity, and quality of life. Ithaca, NY has a [sidewalk policy](#) that funds annual sidewalk construction and maintenance, with priorities based on condition, location, and public input ([see this overview](#) for details). Denver, CO has a [Sidewalk Implementation Plan](#) to repair sidewalks, widen narrow sidewalks, and build new sidewalks where missing. Several municipalities in Dutchess County have sidewalk repair programs, including the cities of Beacon and Poughkeepsie, the Town of Poughkeepsie, and the villages of Millbrook, Tivoli, and Wappingers Falls.

Plow Your Sidewalks:

Many cities have developed municipal snow plowing programs. The [City of Syracuse](#) generally requires property owners to keep sidewalk clear, but contracts with a vendor to plow sidewalks if there is three inches of snow or more. [Rochester, NY](#) plows sidewalks after storms of more than four inches. Non-profit organizations in Duluth, MN run a [snow removal support program](#) for residents with disabilities or other physical

limitations. These programs result in more consistent and equitable plowing. In Dutchess County, the Village of Millbrook removes snow from sidewalks, the Town of Amenia plows sidewalks on State roads, and the City and Town of Poughkeepsie plow the east/west arterials.

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. Denver adds a ['sidewalk service charge'](#) to property owners' stormwater bill, with rebates for low-income residents.

Ithaca 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. 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.

Dutchess County municipalities fund sidewalk maintenance through various sources, including CHIPS funds, CDBG or other grants, bonds, the Highway budget or the general fund. The City of Poughkeepsie, Town of Poughkeepsie and Village of Millbrook fund sidewalk snow plowing through their Public Works/Highway budgets. The Village of Pawling is considering creating a Sidewalk District to fund maintenance.

Plan for Sidewalks:

Municipalities can also be more consistent in requiring sidewalks when land is developed—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 (similar to our [Pedestrian Plans](#)) to show where sidewalks should be, particularly in designated centers and along higher-traffic streets.

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 new development, planning for regular maintenance, and creating funding programs to pay for needed improvements.