

Conservation Montgomery

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Finding our Voice

Perspectives from the CM Board of Directors

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Where the Sidewalks Begin...

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Walkable communities evoke memories of leisurely walks along shaded streets or pleasant meals at outdoor cafés sheltered by overarching trees and plantings of colorful flowers and greenery. Our urban lifestyle almost always includes sidewalk projects because attractive streetscapes are good for business and tend to bring people out into the community.

Many community members, particularly those with young children, yearn for sidewalks as a safety precaution. Parents fear that left to negotiate streets without sidewalks, their children are more likely to be struck by a motorist. But there are sometimes conflicts resulting when trees are mature and healthy trees are sacrificed to retrofit older county neighborhoods with sidewalks. Conflicts emerge over whether pedestrian safety or preservation of tree canopy is more important.

The county Department of Transportation has a set of criteria for evaluating requests from the public for adding sidewalks along a county street. A decision to install a sidewalk is based on meeting a purpose that will ultimately serve the community-at-large. There are also cost considerations, particularly in the times we face now in Montgomery County.

If you look carefully, many of our sidewalk projects consist of lots of brick and concrete with only a few straggly potted shrubs used as landscaping. However, having sidewalks or trees does not have to be an “either/or” situation. Savvy urban planners know that there is value in both sidewalks and an attractive display of native street trees in communities. It’s obvious that street trees make a valuable aesthetic contribution to our quality of life. But they are also an important component of the urban tree canopy, capturing polluted air and absorbing untreated storm water in root systems or within the crown of trees. The Center for Urban Forest Research reports that one mature tree can reduce stormwater runoff by 4,000 gallons a year. Trees are one of the cheapest forms of stormwater management we have.

In their 2008 *Tree Space Design Report*, D.C.-based Casey Trees shows alternatives to making a choice between trees or sidewalks. And University of Florida Professor Edward Gilman illustrates ways to incorporate trees into streetscapes with sidewalks in his presentation *Urban Design to Accommodate Trees: Sidewalk Solutions*. The key is not only to install sidewalks but think outside of the box and look for ways to allow for existing trees to be retained by re-routing the sidewalk around the base of trees along the street.

Most local real estate developers don’t dedicate the space necessary to sustain large trees or provide even pleasantly wide sidewalks. Yet, a truly walkable community requires big trees and wide sidewalks – space for people and trees alike.

Renewing neighborhoods by ripping out older trees to install conventional sidewalks adds little to property values. In fact, it is the trees, not sidewalks, that give a neighborhood a sense of place and add value and desirability to a property. People will always flock to older neighborhoods with tree-lined streets whereas sidewalks are usually a secondary factor in choosing a home.

In a 2004 U.S. Department of Transportation survey of over 9,000 adults, the agency found that the presence of sidewalks has a slight positive effect on the tendency to talk walks but has no effect on the frequency of those walks. The

report also found that nonwalkers reported dissatisfaction with the safe-walking design of their community. But this finding was not evident between frequent and occasional walkers within the walking group.

Consider that shadeless sidewalks might be used less in the summer. And people who exercise might be more likely to retreat to an air-conditioned local gym or simply give up and stay indoors if sidewalks are treeless.

Ask yourself: Is the push for new sidewalks really about making neighborhoods walkable? Or is it more about appeasing anxious homeowners who sincerely believe that the sidewalks will save their errant children from speeding cars?

Sidewalks aren't a substitute for responsible driving or other traffic-calming measures. If we want walkable neighborhoods, we need our trees to be part of the local landscape along with well-designed sidewalks. Community members shouldn't have to choose between pedestrian safety or retaining street trees as an essential part of our neighborhoods.

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