

Sidewalk saga will make for a safer Asheville

The missing link of sidewalk on U.S. 25 should finally be in place next year. The much needed and oft-delayed project is a textbook example of Murphy's Law in practice.

The gap is 2.5 miles between Interstate 40 and Long Shoals Road on the east side of Hendersonville Road. Cost will exceed \$4 million, or more than \$317 a linear foot. That is roughly four times the per-foot cost of 116 other recent Asheville city sidewalk projects.

Why? Pick a reason. A major problem is that Hendersonville Road was widened over the years with no allowance for sidewalks. In some areas there was a wide right of way. In others the right of way was narrow or there were utility poles in the way.

Changes in specifications drove up the estimates. One bidding cycle resulted in no takers when companies learned the work had to be done at night.

Each delay meant higher costs. Plans for sidewalks on the west side of Hendersonville Road had to be dropped to keep costs from rising even higher.

Then there were federal grant deadlines that contributed to incomplete applications. "We did not have the luxury of a big window," said Asheville Transportation Director Ken Putnam. "We couldn't even go out and do surveys to take detailed measurements."

In light of all that, why bother with the sidewalks? Because people need safe ways to walk where they need to go. As it is, "Only a few brave souls use the footpaths on the roadside to get to their destination," said Asheville Bike and Pedestrian Task Force co-facilitator Til Dohse.

The Asheville metropolitan area – Buncombe, Madison, Henderson and Haywood counties – is the most dangerous in North Carolina for pedestrians. Of those hit by vehicles during the last five years in Asheville, 42 were killed or had disabling injuries, according to the state Department of Transportation.

Vice Mayor Gwen Wisler, the council's liaison to the Multimodal Transportation Commission, said she's not happy with the cost but said in the end it's worth it because of safety needs. If she could find the money, she said she'd put sidewalks "every place" because of the safety and health benefits.

Wisler said government didn't require developers to build sidewalks in decades past, and now it's hard to catch up to demand. "Back in the day, who would have thought people wanted to walk. Now we realize if we give people sidewalks, they will actually use them."

Putnam said when the state goes to widen nearby Sweeten Creek Road, "first of all, we're going to ask for sidewalks on both sides. But if we only got sidewalk on one side, I at least want the other side to be sidewalk-ready."

The Hendersonville Road project is a milestone in that completion will close the gap in 13 miles of sidewalk from Beaver Lake to Biltmore Park. We hope the lessons learned will help close other gaps throughout the city. Asheville can be proud of many No. 1 ratings, but not the one for pedestrian peril.

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KEN PUTNAM
ASHEVILLE TRANSPORTATION DIRECTOR