

Naples: Sidewalks Arrive, One Step at a Time

Naples, Florida, is a city of more than 20,000 people, which covers about 10,312 acres, including water bodies. It is located along South-west Florida's Gulf Coast. Approximately 42% of Naples residents are at least 65 years old. Median rent, at the time of the 2000 Census, was \$687. Monthly homeowner costs, for people with mortgages, were \$1,806.

In Naples, Florida, where in 2000 almost half of the population was at least 65 years old, a new effort to make the city more walkable holds great promise for the mobility of older residents. The move to expand the city's sidewalk system also signals a major change in direction for a community that has never been sidewalk-friendly.

Naples residents have long resisted sidewalks for a variety of reasons, including the reluctance to give up any part of their front yards. Historically, the only place the city required sidewalks to be built was in commercial areas. But in light of demographic trends and the desire of many newcomers for transportation alternatives, policymakers say the time has come to make Naples more pedestrian-friendly.

City officials are taking the first step by working to complete a network of sidewalks along major roads. For the long term, they also have instructed the Construction Management department to consider the bigger picture by preparing a formal citywide comprehensive "pathway plan," designed to make it easier to get around Naples by bicycling or walking.

Naples currently has policies to guide sidewalk construction, but no master plan. For years, the city's efforts to build sidewalks were slow and piecemeal, because the only way it could put sidewalks in a residential neighborhood was by the request of residents.

A Walkable City for All Residents

City officials started to be more proactive about making the city pedestrian-friendly in 2005. While many longtime residents are only just beginning to warm up to the idea of having a completed sidewalk system, public officials have been won over by the reality of Naples' aging trends and their own growing awareness of the health and safety benefits of sidewalks for all age groups.

Public sentiment, too, is beginning to change, with more people who are moving into Naples asking for sidewalks and bike-paths so that they can get around the city without a car. Many community groups have started lobbying for sidewalks because people want to be able to walk and bike around town safely. The President of one group, the Fifth Avenue South Association, pointed out to the *Naples Daily News* that more older adults are enjoying the benefits of walking. City officials also like the idea of providing alternative forms of transportation along major roads to reduce traffic.

City Councilman Johnny Nocera, describing what he'd heard at a recent Smart Growth meeting, told the *Naples Daily News* that sidewalks have become very popular. He said it is the city council's responsibility to



Sidewalk on 3rd Avenue S. makes Naples neighborhood more walkable.

look after the health and welfare of its residents, and noted that a complete sidewalk system is in the city's best interest.¹

Before the city could begin developing a sidewalk system, it had to adopt a new sidewalk policy that would enable its Construction Management department to complete a network of sidewalks along major roads. Naples' new sidewalk policy, adopted in February 2005, allows the city to finish building and connecting the sidewalks along its major roads. After filling in the missing links along roads used by people to travel across the city, Naples will build sidewalks along other major roads that currently have no sidewalks at all.

Sidewalks Easier to Build

But it is another element of the new sidewalk policy that best reflects the substantial change in attitudes toward sidewalk construction. Before the policy was developed, city officials had to win the support of a majority of the property owners whose front yards were along the major roads before they could install sidewalks. Today, the city can put in sidewalks along major roads as long as they enhance the sidewalk system.

The new policy also reduced the proportion of property owners who have to support sidewalk construction before the city can build one in a neighborhood. Whereas Naples officials used to have to get the approval of 70 percent of property owners to build a sidewalk in a neighborhood setting, now they need the support of only 50 percent, plus one owner. While that change reflects the way sidewalk construction was handled in the past, the new policy goes further by ensuring that all new sidewalks will be connected and improved to function as a whole network.

The transportation element in Naples' Comprehensive Master Plan states that the city will install and improve segments of its sidewalks and bike paths. In January 2005, Naples City Council asked the Construction



Management department to accomplish this by creating a formal citywide sidewalk plan. That request prompted the Construction Management Department to revisit the city's sidewalk policy because it was too restrictive to implement such a plan.

The department developed policy changes, gathering public input during public meetings and through the city's planning and community services advisory boards. When they proposed the revised policy, the City Council approved it, giving the Construction Management Department the latitude it needed to complete Naples' sidewalk system. Since that time, the department has been working to implement its plan for sidewalks along all major roads, with funding provided by the city's gas tax and by the Florida Department of Transportation.

One Step at a Time

The unpopularity of sidewalks with homeowners who want to preserve their entire front yard has been a huge challenge in Naples. But city officials have made progress in getting a sidewalk master plan written, despite the fact that so many residents have resisted the idea of a citywide sidewalk system.

It was only in recent years, with many newcomers supporting the sidewalk plan, that city policymakers were able to move forward. But after so many years of opposition, the city's

regulations governing infrastructure are not pedestrian-oriented. The city also faces the twin challenges of a limited amount of right of way and obstructions that block the paths of many planned sidewalks. Finally, the city's gas tax revenue, one of the major sources of funding for sidewalk construction, has declined.

Ron Wallace, director of Construction Management, notes that it would be a lot easier to put in sidewalks if the city had required them and regulated its right of way better over time. He advises other communities to develop a master plan and work to build the support of public officials—a vital asset—early.

Wallace's work is not done. In the future, Naples plans to have a Comprehensive Pathway Plan that will serve as a master plan for a larger system of sidewalks and bicycle paths. The city council recently approved \$100,000 in funding to begin the planning process for the pathway plan, which will incorporate bike and pedestrian paths throughout the city.

¹ Reported by I.M. Stackel, "Naples City Council Passes Sidewalk Master Plan," *Naples Daily News*, February 3, 2005; available at http://www.naplesnews.com/news/2005/feb/03/ndn_naples_city_council_passes_sidewalk_master_pla/

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