

Where the Sidewalk Begins

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Ever since Maryknoll Avenue in Bethesda got a new sidewalk two years ago, residents have noticed more children walking to and from school, more dog-walkers, more parents pushing strollers, more children riding scooters and more people in general on the street and in front yards.

In just half an hour on a beautiful afternoon last fall, Robin Rosenblum sat on her doorstep and happily counted almost 60 people of all generations passing by, including groups of schoolchildren.

"It's fun watching kids with their friends and enjoying their own community and their neighborhood," said Rosenblum, who was a lead advocate for the sidewalk and whose own 9-year-old walks the almost half-mile home from school most days.

Even though residents in some places have objected, local governments are retrofitting older neighborhoods with new sidewalks to improve pedestrian safety, respond to changing traffic patterns, and promote more walkable communities as part of "smart growth" planning. For homeowners getting sidewalks for the first time, the walkways can change the look of their front yard and the feel of their street.

Along busy Seminary Road in Silver Spring, the new sidewalk makes that stretch "so much better for people," said Natalie Morrison, who has lived there for 48 years and raised three children. "It's a lot safer and a lot friendlier. People are pushing their children in strollers," she said.

Before, most people didn't spend time near the street except to get to their car. Now, she and her neighbors are more likely to walk to a corner grocery store sometimes instead of always driving. One major drawback is that she lost an unofficial dirt parking space in front of her house and must jockey for curb space with her neighbors.

On 21st Street in Arlington's Cherrydale section, new sidewalks were carved out of the unusually broad street at homeowners' request. The result is a more homey environment, according to Margaret Frondorf, a mother of two who has lived there for 14 years.

Before, the street was too wide and had "a very urban, cold, uninviting feeling," Frondorf said. The pathway is wide enough for families to walk together, allows neighborhood kids to congregate and helps buffer the houses from the street, she said.

Real estate agents say it's hard to measure how new sidewalks translate into home resale value, especially in today's hot market where multiple bids are common. But sidewalks act as a visual seam for front walks that otherwise land right at parked cars in the street. They also provide common ground for gathering.

For those looking for a neighborhood -- and not just a house -- they contribute to an overall "neighborhood amenity package," said Steve C. Agostino of Taylor Long & Foster in Chevy Chase, D.C., where close-knit streets are a selling point. "People tend to like a neighborhood with sidewalks, because it tends to be more connected," Agostino said.

When Eleanor Balaban, an agent with Long & Foster's Bethesda office, asks house-hunting clients to list the top 10 features they want, sidewalks often figure on that list, especially for parents of young children, she said. One client would buy a house on a high-traffic, sidewalk-less street only after first determining that she could maneuver a stroller to a nearby playground via a rear alley.

"If the kitchen's perfect and the back yard's perfect, I'm not sure the sidewalk would kill the contract," Balaban said.

Creating walkable, active urban centers is a planning strategy promoted by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, a regional organization, and shared by many of its jurisdictions. The District tries to incorporate sidewalk repair and construction into road reconstruction projects. Montgomery County has had a longtime mission to make it easier to walk to transit stations and shopping areas, as well as to create continuous paths for cyclists. In Arlington, "we're pretty active in trying to create a truly walkable community," said Charlie Denney, manager of the county's bicycle and pedestrian program. In 1997, the county set a planning goal of putting sidewalks on at least one side of every residential street and both sides of every major artery.

But budget restraints and neighbors' objections often limit such plans. Local opposition has derailed many projects and can explain why sidewalks dead-end at one house and pick up again a few houses later, according to several transportation planners. Sidewalks use space that some homeowners consider their front yard and may have landscaped accordingly, even though the frontage is owned by the city. Other common worries are about losing older trees, whether foot traffic will reduce privacy and security, and the added responsibility of clearing a sidewalk when it snows.

Sidewalks -- and curbs that accompany them -- often mean conceding that a street isn't so quiet and rural anymore.

Such concerns had divided the Maryknoll neighborhood in Bethesda two years ago. Montgomery County stepped in because Maryknoll is within walking distance of two schools -- the new walkway merges with one to Pyle Middle School on Wilson Lane -- and is a feeder street for school buses, carpools and general traffic in and out of the neighborhood.

Now a neat cement path runs alongside the houses all the way from Wilson Lane to Burning Tree Elementary and its park and ball fields. The path bends around some older trees, although a few trees were taken down in the process, residents said.

There have been annual block parties (originally to help reunite the divided neighborhood), well-attended "walk to school" days and -- a reasonable barometer of neighborliness -- much more demand for candy on Halloween.

Maria Nightingale has lived for 28 years on adjacent Maryknoll Court -- a short cul-de-sac off Maryknoll -- and acknowledged being sympathetic to neighbors who wanted a new sidewalk as well as those who were strongly opposed. Now that it's in place, "I can see how it's changed the neighborhood, in a way," she said while out walking the dog on the path one unseasonably warm afternoon. "We see more people walking, and we meet more people."

Plenty of streets have neighborly spirit and no sidewalks. Others have sidewalks that

simply do what they are primarily intended to do -- make it safer to walk.

Along a 10-block stretch of Western Avenue on the District-Maryland line, with the road still messy with construction, it's too soon to tell what might change as a new sidewalk is carved out of front yards on the city side. Western is a Metrobus corridor and popular connector for walkers and runners to trails in Rock Creek Park. It is also lined with tall old trees and stately houses from the 1920s and 1930s.

Leah and Walker Roberts, who have three school-age children, were so excited about getting a sidewalk in front of their house that soon after the cement was poured in January, they cheered one of its first pedestrians from their front porch.

Most of their family's neighborhood social life still is out the back door -- where the back yard leads to an alley and a quieter street. But they look forward to more camaraderie in the front.

"All things being equal, I would love to have this house, on this lot, on a street like Runnymede [a nearby D.C. street with sidewalks on both sides] where you can have a block party," said Walker Roberts. "If the sidewalks give us any part of that, that would be great."

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