

Crumbling sidewalks

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Rising construction costs hamper repair projects

Sidewalks, curbs and gutters that are crumbling are the kind of thing that get citizens' attention, because people encounter and use them every day. Getting them fixed is expensive, and takes longer with a tight budget.

So even though the city council greenlit about \$250,000 that was previously set aside for a design and engineering plan to fix curbs, gutters and sidewalks on five blocks around the city, only one of them will happen in the next year. That's because each block will cost \$400,000 – equal to the entire sidewalk budget for the 2023 fiscal year.

“Construction [costs] of these projects has gone up tremendously. I did originally request \$2 million to construct the five blocks. Unfortunately, due to budget constraints, I was only able to receive \$400,000, so we will only be able to construct one block,” Public Works Director Robert Hamblen said. “The costs of materials are just skyrocketing. Not just materials, everything.”

The price of concrete has gone from \$132 per yard before the pandemic to \$174 per yard now. “Also the concrete companies are having supply issues getting fly ash and other components [which could push prices higher],” Hamblen said.

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Fuel costs are also straining budgets across the board. “I’m hoping and praying that \$400,000 will still be enough to do just that one block,” he said.

Sidewalks are only expected to last 10-15 years. Hamblen estimated that most of Gallup’s sidewalks date back to the 1950s – before the Americans with Disabilities Act, which requires that new sidewalks include ramps at corners to make them wheelchair accessible.

Many walks were laid with river rock, so they degrade faster because concrete aggregate doesn’t bind as well with the rocks’ smooth surfaces as with rougher rock shapes.

To make matters worse, parts of the city sit on a former lakebed. That, combined with the protracted drought baking water out of the clay-heavy soil, can cause sidewalks to shift and buckle in much less time. One area of Ciniza Drive is breaking down after just four years. The city has tried various solutions, including reinforcing some sidewalks with rebar, but it isn’t enough.

“The soil [underneath] is so dry that it’s shrinking and causing buckling on the sidewalks,” Hamblen said. “I’ve had streets lift up about 18 inches overnight.”

His budget includes \$20,000 per year to repair smaller sidewalk issues, usually stretches between 10 feet and 30 feet, as they arise. If necessary he can draw from another \$60,000 in Street Department funds.

“Sometimes we run short. Then the Council must approve more funding, however it’s not enough to take care of a whole block or the whole city,” Hamblen said.

Consumers know it costs more to pay for things over time, and big box stores are proof that buying in bulk can bring prices down. The same is true for sidewalks. “We might be able to get a better deal if we could contract out multiple blocks at one time,” Hamblen said.

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Relief is not on the horizon, but Hamblen said he'll apply for any applicable state or federal grants that come along. Even then, competition from other cities will be fierce.

Meanwhile, deteriorating sidewalks are scattered around the city about equally in residential and business neighborhoods, inconveniencing locals and potentially creating liability issues for the city.

"Not only do we not have sidewalks, we don't have curbs," Linda Sherman, who lives on the 1000 block of Mesa Avenue, said. "I've been here for about 26 years and never had sidewalks. The curbs are there, but they are pretty much worn out."

In heavy rain, that causes problems. Sherman's home is on a hill, and water runs into her garage during storms.

"I have to put sandbags in front of the garage to keep the water out," she said. "A few years back I complained. I was able to get them to come and redo the street, but they said they weren't doing the sidewalks, curbs or gutters because of the steep hill."

So far liability hasn't come up, but it could. Last year, one member of a vacationing couple tripped on a Kachina Street sidewalk.

"A couple from out of town went out to eat and went back to their motel. There was a section of sidewalk that had heaved that someone tripped on," Hamblen said. "The individual tripped and they were sore, but did not need to go to the hospital."

A 2016 "pavement distress survey" included observations on a total of 372 sidewalk sections, which vary in length (an average block is 1,000 feet long). The tally rated 156 segments good, 186 fair and 30 poor. Curbs and gutters were rated separately. Of 403 sections, 138 were rated good, 214 fair and 51 were poor.

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“The majority of the conditions they rated as fair. Next would be good. They also looked at the existing curb and gutter, because some have a curb and gutter but no sidewalk,” Hamblen said.

Typically, developers are required to build streets and sidewalks when they construct a tract. In a few places there have been exceptions where the developer installed curbs and a street, but no sidewalks. That’s what happened on Elva Drive.

The replacement list approved June 14 includes two projects set for District 4 and one each for districts 1, 2 and 3, ensuring the city’s resources are spread fairly among neighborhoods. Councilor Fran Palochak’s District 4 gets two blocks on the list because those neighborhoods have gotten short shrift in prior projects, Councilor Sarah Piano, Dist. 3, noted.

The blocks on the approved list for sidewalk improvements are:

Country Club Drive from Hill Avenue south to Logan Avenue (District 1, Garcia)

Ciniza Drive from Toltec Avenue west to the drainage bridge (District 2, Schaaf)

Mariyanna Avenue from Nizhoni Drive south to Anton Street (District 3, Piano)

Elva Drive from the water tank to the southern end; and Stagecoach Drive from Aztec Avenue south to Escalante Road (District 4, Palochak)

Palochak put in a word to put Elva Drive at the top of the list.

“I want to advocate for Elva Drive because they do not have sidewalks and they really need

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sidewalks. That is why I really pushed hard to get Elva in there,” she said. “It’s only going to be from the tank to the residential area at the end of the street.”

Mayor Louie Bonaguidi pointed out that “all the streets are in dire need.”

Piano lamented the rising costs but said that doing the design and engineering for all five blocks means, “They’ll be shovel-ready, so when we do find funding, hopefully they will be ready to go.”

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