

LA's Sidewalks: Penny Wise and Pound Foolish

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LA WATCHDOG-The City of Los Angeles is expected to spend \$1.4 billion over the next 30 years to repair our sidewalks pursuant to a Settlement Agreement involving the Willits class action lawsuit that alleged that the City was not in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

While the yet to be disclosed Settlement Agreement appears to be a favorable deal for the City, the Bureau of Street Services (which is responsible for sidewalks), the Public Works Department, and “our” City Council have not developed a strategic or operational plan to repair and maintain our sidewalks despite the fact that our cracked walkways have been front and center for the last two years.

Yet this lack of planning did not deter the taxpayer-be-damned City Council from considering a \$4.5 billion tax increase last year, of which over \$600 million would have been devoted to our sidewalks. But this proposition was yanked at the last minute because of Controller Ron Galperin’s high critical audit of the Bureau of Street Services and its lack of adequate controls and management information systems.

The City does not have a clear understanding of the state our sidewalks or the cost to repair and maintain them in a sustainable manner. At a public meeting in the Harbor area, a representative of the City Administrative Officer said that \$1.4 billion would not be enough to repair our non-commercial sidewalks.

But Councilman Paul Krekorian disputed this assertion, referring to a February 2008 Bureau of Street Services report that indicated that while 38% of the properties had some sidewalk damage, the impaired segments represented only 12% of the sidewalks when measured in linear feet.

While a 1911 State law assigns the responsibility for the repair and maintenance of sidewalks to the adjacent property owner, the City is liable for tree damaged segments as a result of a 1973 ordinance that was passed when the City Council overrode Mayor Bradley’s veto.

Under this scenario, the City is responsible for less than 6% of the City’s sidewalk segments, a considerably lower burden than previous estimates that would have cost as much as \$2 billion.

In the past, the City Council was under the impression that a comprehensive survey and analysis of the status of our 10,750 miles of sidewalks would cost \$10 million, or about \$930 a mile. While this questionable estimate was never investigated or verified, the City Council determined to wing it using the excuse that it would rather dedicate this money to repair damaged sidewalks, especially those adjacent to City owned properties.

But when has any responsible party embarked on a \$1.4 billion infrastructure program without having a definitive strategic, operational, or financial plan in place?

While the City can begin to repair the sidewalks adjacent to City owned properties such as parks, libraries, police stations, and fire houses, work that is expected to cost more than \$50 million and take two to three years, Mayor Eric Garcetti and the City Council would be well advised to invest some upfront dollars to determine the status of the City's sidewalks and to develop a sustainable, cost effective plan to repair and maintain our sidewalks.

Putting it in terms that are easy for the Mayor and the City Council to understand, rather than being Penny Wise and Pound Foolish, the City should follow an old military adage: Proper Planning Prevents Piss Poor Performance.

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