

A few of you inadvertently received an earlier draft of this communication in connection with my Fuller Road Station communication. My apologies for the duplication.

Dear Friends,

Sometimes we don't get it right. For years now, Ann Arbor has made a mess of sidewalk repair and replacement. We're looking to do better in the future.

As most of you know, the current state of the law is that the repair and maintenance of sidewalks are the responsibility of the property owner. Over the past few years, Ann Arbor sought to ensure the good repair of sidewalks by creating rotating enforcement zones in which Staff would inspect sidewalks and notify property owners of their obligation to fix the sidewalks as necessary. You've probably seen the chart in *The Observer*.

This program of inspection and decentralized repair always struck me as problematic because it failed to recognize that sidewalks are a public asset and failed to take advantage of economies of scale. The policy unfairly imposed high cost on some residents and zero cost on other residents. The policy also required Ann Arbor to spend a substantial amount of staff time devoted to inspection, record keeping, reporting, communication, re-inspection, and enforcement. Finally, due to the wide array of contractors, the quality and nature of the repairs has been inconsistent.

In any event, there is now a proposal to change all that. City Council has put a measure on the November 2011 ballot that would have Ann Arbor assume responsibility for sidewalk inspection, repair and maintenance. Under this system, things will be simple and centralized – Ann Arbor will bid out replacement services citywide and sidewalks would be repaired on an as-needed, as-reported basis. To fund this program, we propose to add 1/8 mil to the upcoming ballot proposal to renew the Street Repair Millage. This increase would raise taxes by approximately \$13.38 per year on a home with a market value of \$214,000.

Some have expressed concern that Ann Arbor's assumption of responsibility for sidewalks would be unfair to people who have already replaced sidewalks. Folks with this concern argue that these homeowners would essentially be paying twice – once to fix their sidewalks, and again through the tax increase. They also argue that the introduction of this program would create a substantial unfairness – if one property owner's sidewalks fell into disrepair last year, they paid; if another property owner's sidewalks fall into disrepair next year, Ann Arbor will pay. For my part, I see the truth in these observations, but they are not sufficient to oppose the proposal.

It is correct that some folks will have paid dearly for sidewalk repair in the past, and some folks will have not paid for sidewalk repair at all. This is a true inequity and those who have repaired numerous slabs recently will have just cause for disappointment. To address this disparity, some have suggested that we reimburse homeowners who have fixed their sidewalks. This would be a fine solution in an ideal world, but to do so would cost many millions of dollars and create an administrative quagmire. It is simply not practical.

The current system maintains the public sidewalks by imposing arbitrary and substantial costs on individuals while allowing others to contribute nothing. If Ann Arbor has the means, we should fix this system. We can obtain the means to fix this system through a broad and modest tax increase.

Although Ann Arbor is making a push to bring all sidewalks up to standard prior to this potential conversation, any change will create some inequity. Going forward, however, a system to maintain public sidewalks will be efficient and will spread the cost throughout the taxpaying population. This is a substantial improvement. To maintain the status quo would perpetuate an unfair, costly system. The only thing we can do with certainty and clarity is to change going forward. In the end, I believe that this change, even this imperfect change, is good for Ann Arbor.

That all said, acceptance of this proposal would constitute a modest tax increase and would raise the concerns described above. Although I have described how I view the situation now, I am very interested to know your thoughts. Thanks in advance.

Kind regards,

Christopher

P.S. As ever, if you do not wish to receive these emails, please just let me know.