

To	Marchell Adams-David, City Manager
Thru	Paul Kallam, Director
From	Strategic Plan Initiative Team Transportation & Transit 5.1
Department	Transportation
Date	March 14, 2024
Subject	Sidewalk Petition Program – Equity Reform Recommendation

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### Summary

Strategic Plan Transportation and Transit Initiative 5.1 (TT 5.1) directs staff to:

*Evaluate revisions to transportation programs and policies to improve equitable implementation of infrastructure improvements, broaden options, increase eligibility, and reduce barriers to participation.*

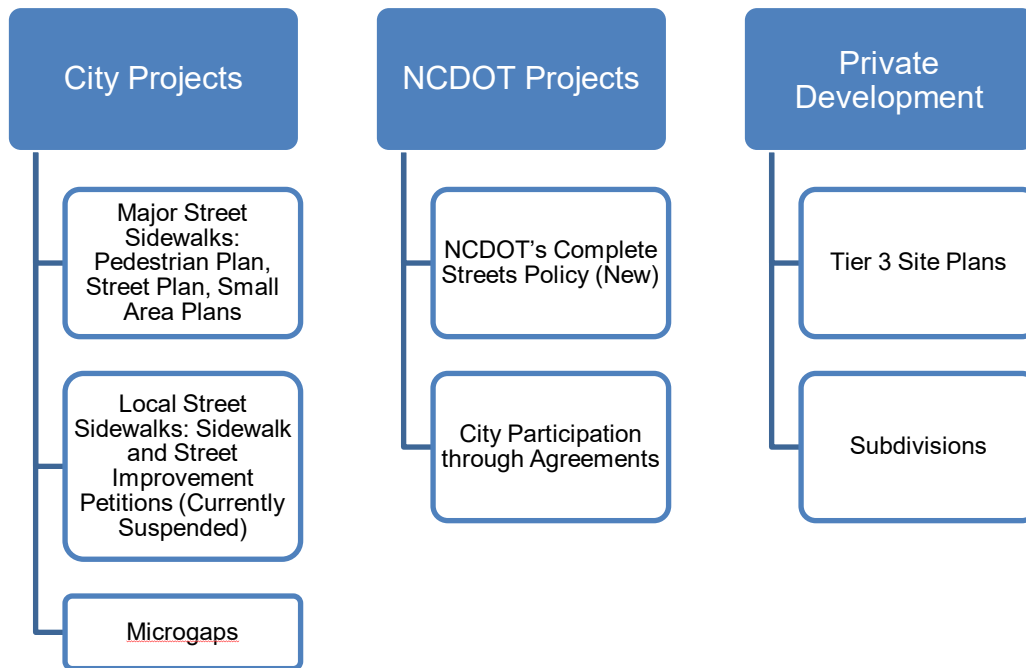
To support this initiative, the TT 5.1 team conducted an equity review of the existing Sidewalk Petition Program. In short, the team found that the program as previously structured does not lead to equitable outcomes in neighborhood sidewalk delivery. The team recommends reforming the program to remove the petition component and developing a simple data-driven framework to identify, score, and rank sidewalks in neighborhoods that is aligned with current City policies and priorities. Further, the team recommends a revised approach to all city-led sidewalk projects that uses a simple and consistent scoring framework that can be regularly updated across all project types, including neighborhood sidewalks, major street sidewalks, and microgaps. In addition, the new approach would include a clear policy to direct the proportion of resources that go to each of these project types.

The remainder of this memorandum provides background on the petition program, the findings from the initiative team’s data review and public engagement effort, and more detail on reform recommendations.

## Sidewalk Delivery Overview

New sidewalks are constructed in the City by three different entities: the City, NCDOT, and the private sector. The Sidewalk Petition Program is one of the categories of City-led sidewalk projects. The other major bucket of City-led sidewalk projects – sidewalks on major streets – is guided by the *2012 Comprehensive Pedestrian Plan*. Sidewalk petitions have historically not been accepted for projects that are included in the Pedestrian Plan’s prioritized project list.

Figure 1: Sources of New Sidewalks



## Sidewalk Petition Program Background

The Sidewalk Petition Program (SPP) was created to address sidewalk needs in neighborhoods that were developed before regulations were in place that required sidewalk construction on all new streets or in neighborhoods that were annexed into the City after their initial development. The SPP currently provides the opportunity for City residents to initiate sidewalk construction on neighborhood streets at no cost to the applicant or neighbors.

Petition projects advance if the requested sidewalk is 1) eligible based on a few key criteria (e.g. not already funded through another City program) and 2) receives sufficient neighborhood support through balloting. Projects are then ranked using criteria related to connectivity, safety, equity, and cost-effectiveness. The Wake County Vulnerability Index (described later in this memorandum) is used to account for equity, and accounts for up to 3 points out of a total of over 20 points. The highest-ranking projects are included in the annual Capital Improvement Program.

The Sidewalk Petition Program was suspended in 2020 due to a construction backlog and insufficient funding to deliver projects in a reasonable timeframe. City leadership is interested in evaluating whether to restart the program, reform the program, or replace the program with an entirely different approach to neighborhood sidewalk delivery.

### **Data Review Approach and Findings**

Following the evaluation framework outlined in the *Racial Equity Toolkit* developed by the Government Alliance on Race and Equity, the team collected available sidewalk petition data from 2011 – 2019, mapped the petitions, and overlaid the results with key demographic indicators. These included demographics from the US Census as well as two composite equity indicators: the 2019 Wake County Vulnerability Assessment and the 2019 Raleigh Prosperity Index. They also mapped sidewalk needs on neighborhood streets to compare those needs with actual petitions received. A detailed summary of findings is included in the January 6, 2022 memo to the Transportation Director, included in the agenda backup materials. The analysis yielded the following observations:

- Petitions are underrepresented in the most vulnerable areas and overrepresented in the most prosperous areas, relative to sidewalk needs.
- Petitions are underrepresented in areas where a greater proportion of the population identifies as black.
- Petitions are overrepresented in areas with a larger proportion of white, non-Hispanic population.

### **Engagement Strategy and Findings**

As a key next step in applying the Racial Equity Toolkit, the team engaged the community on the Sidewalk Petition Program. Engagement focused on finding out resident preferences on new sidewalks in their neighborhood and resident awareness of the former petition program. The team developed a survey to answer these questions that was open to all residents and promoted via social media and other city communication channels.

The team promoted the survey specifically to residents in neighborhoods that were historically underrepresented in the petition program based on the data analysis findings. Promotion was completed using tabling events at community centers and existing City festivals and targeted postcard mailings (6,195 postcards were mailed). The tabling events allowed the team to interact one on one with residents in target areas to hear their perspective and preference on sidewalks in their neighborhood.

The survey ended with a total of 444 participants and 551 comments. A full summary is attached in the agenda backup materials. Key findings include the following:

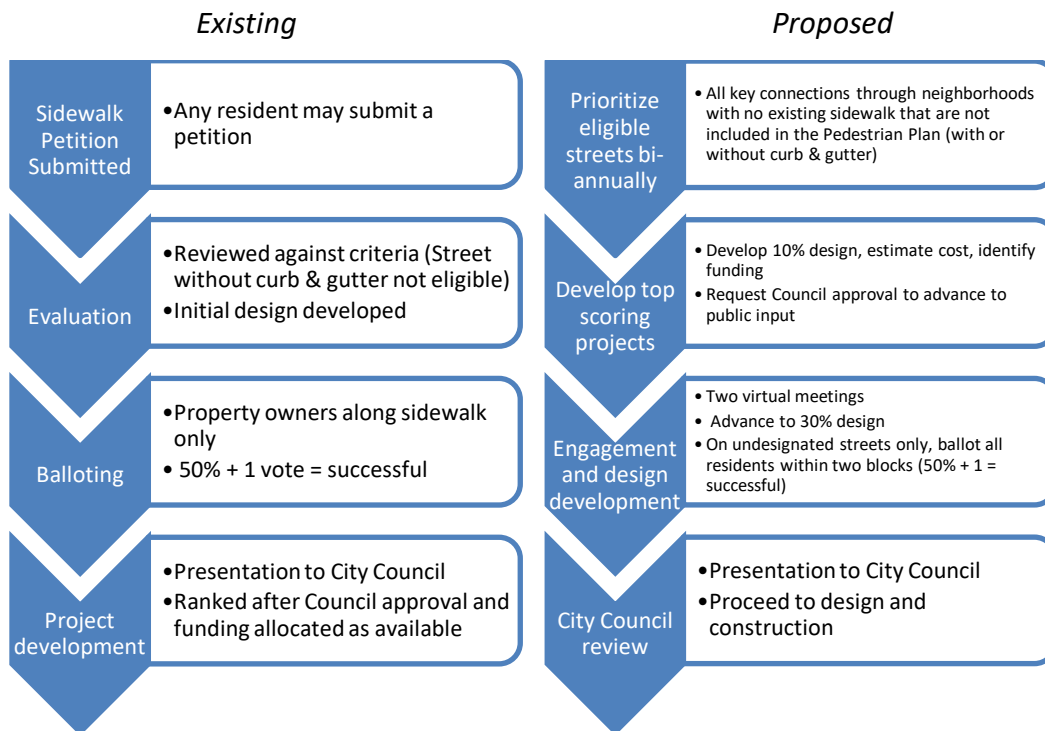
- Most respondents without a sidewalk would like a sidewalk. There is no significant geographic variation in this preference. Previous participation in the petition program does not correlate to a higher preference for sidewalks.

- Most respondents were not aware of the sidewalk petition program. Many of the target areas were clustered in south and southeast Raleigh, where awareness of the program was lower than average.
- While the most common existing walking trip purpose was recreation, respondents identified the top priority destinations as schools and bus stops. Schools were identified as a consistent priority in all zip codes. Residents expressed safety concerns for children walking to schools through neighborhoods without sidewalks.
- Renters are underrepresented in the survey. While 11% of respondents rent their home, 48% of City housing units are renter-occupied.
- The white population is overrepresented in the survey (81% of respondents versus 56% of City residents) and the Hispanic population is underrepresented in the survey (3% of respondents versus 11% of City residents).

### Sidewalk Petition Program Reform Recommendation

In response to these findings, the TT 5.1 team recommends that the identification and prioritization of local sidewalks is reformed from a reactive, petition-based process to a proactive data-driven process. We further recommend that some balloting is retained to allow localized input, but with two key adjustments. First, limit balloting to projects along streets not designated in the Street Plan, since the Street Plan is a piece of the *Comprehensive Plan* that is the result of extensive public engagement. Second, where streets are undesignated, ballot a wider area that encompasses all those who currently walk or wish to walk along the street. Ballot both renters and owners, since renters are key stakeholders with valuable input regarding the need for sidewalks. Figure 2 compares the existing program structure to the proposed program structure.

Figure 2: Neighborhood Sidewalk Program Revised Structure



The following key elements of the proposal are noted:

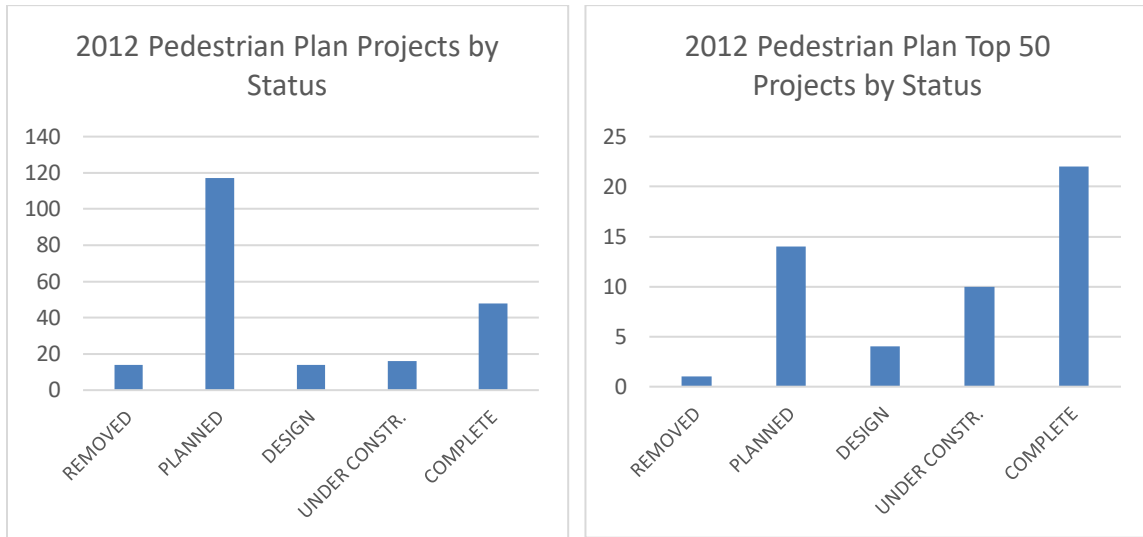
- Limit projects to key connections through neighborhoods that are not included in the *Pedestrian Plan*. These key through streets carry greater vehicular traffic from smaller streets to avenues. In many neighborhoods, these are designated in the Street Plan as 'Neighborhood Street' or 'Avenue 2-Lane Undivided'. Staff recommends the City focus on these local streets first and then prioritize needs on other local streets after sidewalks are completed in all neighborhoods on these key connections.
- The team recommends including streets without curb and gutter in the program since needs exist in some older neighborhoods that were developed without curb and gutter. During the design process, staff will look for cost-effective ways to construct sidewalks on these streets, such as placing the sidewalk behind a swale where feasible, or will recommend the inclusion of curb and gutter in the design where needed.
- The following equally-weighted prioritization factors are recommended:
  - Safety (traffic volume and speed, pedestrian crash history)
  - Destination access (proximity to schools, parks, retail, employment)
  - Transit access (proximity to Bus Rapid Transit stops, bus stops)
  - Equity (composite transportation equity index)

### **Status of *Comprehensive Pedestrian Plan* Implementation**

While the TT 5.1 team focused on the sidewalk petition program, staff recognizes the need to consider the context of this program within the overall City Pedestrian Program. Staff reviewed the status of the Pedestrian Plan implementation, since the *2012 Raleigh Pedestrian Plan* is currently used to prioritize sidewalk projects on major streets. The Pedestrian Plan was adopted by City Council on January 2, 2013 and included a prioritized project list of 209 sidewalk projects. An updated list of 214 sidewalk projects using revised prioritization was subsequently adopted by City Council on June 2, 2015. This second list excluded projects that were already completed or in progress at that time.

Figure 3 summarizes the significant implementation progress that has been made since the plan was adopted in 2013. At least some portion of 40% of the 200+ projects have been completed or are moving forward. Almost three quarters of the top 50 projects are complete or moving forward. A similar review of the 2015 adopted list shows that over half of the top 25 projects are complete or moving forward. 42% of the top 50 projects and 18% of all projects in the 2015 list are complete or moving forward.

Figure 3: Pedestrian Plan Implementation

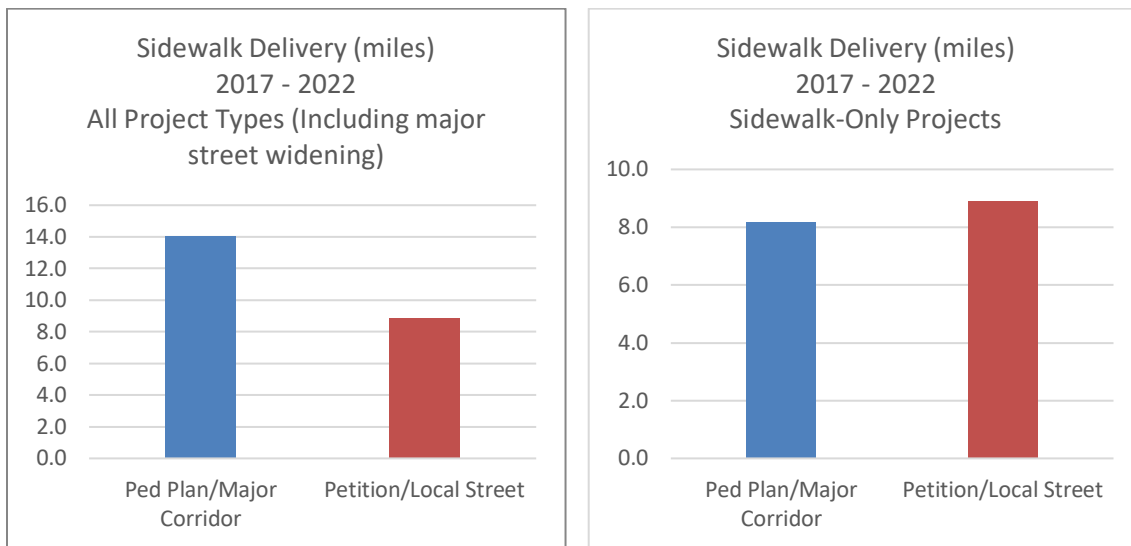


While significant progress has been achieved, significant work remains to implement the Pedestrian Plan. Staff has requested funding to complete a full update to this plan. In the interim, staff recommends an update to project scoring that aligns with the reform recommended for local street sidewalk projects. This reform will allow staff to keep the priority list updated indefinitely.

#### Allocation of Resources

Figure 4 summarizes the most recent six-year history of completed sidewalk projects. Petition projects represent almost forty percent of the mileage of City-led sidewalk projects during this period (chart on the left). If sidewalks constructed as part of major street projects are excluded (the chart on the right), petition projects represent over 50% of sidewalk mileage. Historically, an allocation between these two project types was not specified in our sidewalk policy. As a point of reference, the 2017 bond allocated approximately 70% of sidewalk funding to major corridors and 30% of funding to neighborhood corridors.

Figure 4: Sidewalk Construction History by Type



The team recommends an explicit policy choice about the proportion of sidewalk funds that are allocated to each of these buckets. They also recommend they are kept as separate buckets rather than all scored and rank together, for the following reason.

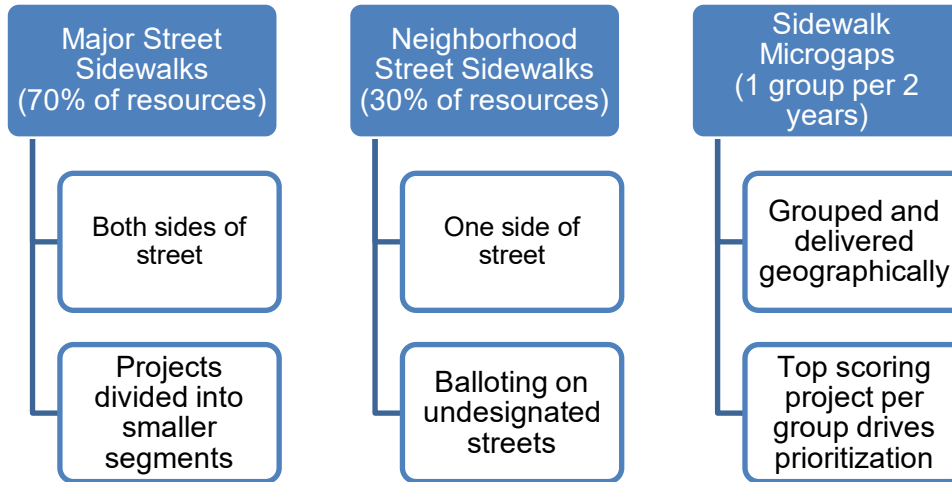
Major streets carry higher volumes of traffic at higher speed. They also host bus routes, and many commercial and retail destinations. Most crashes occur on major streets. If all project types were lumped together, these streets would likely outscore all neighborhood streets and be the only sidewalk types implemented for the foreseeable future.

Neighborhood street sidewalks tend to serve more students walking to neighborhood schools than major street sidewalks. They also improve quality of life by providing a comfortable space to walk without being located adjacent to high-speed, high-volume traffic. The historic volume of sidewalk petitions indicates that residents value sidewalks in this context. While keeping this bucket separate but allocating fewer resources, the program can put the most funding to the higher-need safety-focused sidewalks while continuing to expand walking opportunities in neighborhoods. This approach also recognizes that major street improvement projects will continue to build out sidewalks on major streets along with sidewalk-specific projects on major streets.

### **Comprehensive Sidewalk Program Reform**

The team recommends the following changes to the overall sidewalk program to add clarity and predictability internally and externally. Figure 4 summarizes the recommended approach. Sidewalks delivered by NCDOT and private development will remain unchanged, since these projects are not driven by the City. The allocations shown are recommended for sidewalk-specific resources. Major street improvement projects that are funded separately would also continue to deliver more sidewalks on major streets than those produced by this program.

Figure 4: Overall Sidewalk Program Revised Structure – City Projects



The team also recommends a consistent scoring matrix across all three project groupings to simplify scoring and allow in-house bi-annual updates to be completed by staff without consultant support. Currently, sidewalks on major streets are prioritized based on a combination of demand factors (e.g. multi-family housing, schools, bus stops) and pedestrian needs (e.g. traffic volumes, crashes, demographics). Projects were rescored via updates in 2015. Another update was initiated in 2019 but never completed due to insufficient capacity and staff turnover. Another scoring update and a new approach that is resilient to these challenges is now overdue. A straightforward, simplified scoring system across all programs will be easier to update regularly going forward and be more transparent to the public and decision-makers. Projects would still be compared within their category (major streets to major streets and neighborhood streets to neighborhood streets), for the reasons described previously.

**Next Steps**

The team recommends that the division who manages sidewalk development, Transportation Mobility, Strategy, and Infrastructure, further develops the details of the revised program upon concurrence from Council with this overall direction.