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To: ZZ City Clerk External; ZZ Council Members
Subject: #25-0057 sidewalks

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Dear Council Members,

I am writing about the sidewalk resolution. I think it's an opportunity to look at a big issue with fresh eyes, but I don't have much hope that will happen.

Could we use this resolution to consider safety solutions that might be different, more effective, less expensive, and more climate friendly? We might find better ways to do things that would be more supported by more people.

Why is this resolution even proposed? There are lots of areas in La Crosse that do not currently have sidewalks and many of the people living there do not want them. It's not because they are lazy or greedy or uncaring or don't understand rights of way. Every person has her own reasons and opinions, but if homeowners don't have a voice in what happens in their own neighborhoods, if no one listens to their opinions and experience, or if their concerns are dismissed or denigrated, what good is an elected city council?

Nobody wants things to be less safe for their families or their neighbors. Sidewalks can provide safety, but not in every situation (at intersections, where there is cracked and buckled pavement, or where snow or vehicles block the sidewalk, for example).

We need sidewalks, signs, lights, beacons, crosswalks, and more because we assume that cars have the right to go where they want as fast as they want. But what if we decide that cars are not always the kings. that slowing car speeds and restricting car access, especially in very low traffic residential neighborhoods, may provide as much or more safety, in addition to other benefits including lower noise levels(1), lower air pollution levels (2), and more community cohesion (3)?

But, we never get to have this discussion or explore these options. In fact, we are sometimes told that there are *not* alternatives. That is just wrong.

For example, Austin, Texas; Arlington, Virginia; Santa Clara, California; Durham, North Carolina; New York state, and Massachusetts, among others, have or are piloting shared streets program for residential neighborhoods. "The Shared Streets program aims to make neighborhood streets without sidewalks safer and more comfortable for walking, bicycling, and rolling. The goal is to improve safety and mobility for people of all ages and abilities by encouraging slower speeds, slowing turning movements, and reducing crossing distances for people walking."
<https://www.austintexas.gov/SharedStreets>

Washington is considering state legislation to allow for shared streets – non-arterial highways where pedestrians, bicyclists, and vehicular traffic share a portion or all of the same street with a maximum speed limit of 10 miles per hour.
<https://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2025-26/Pdf/Bill%20Reports/Senate/5595%20SBA%20TRAN%2025.pdf>

There are actually official guides for designing shared streets. (<https://nacto.org/publication/urban-street-design-guide/streets/residential-shared-street/> and <https://transportation.org/active/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2023/01/fhwahep17096-min.pdf>)

Of course we need sidewalks in many places depending upon volume and speed of car traffic, but do we need them everywhere? There may be different safety solutions in different situations, but we are not allowed to even consider them.

I'm glad for sidewalks where they are needed, and as a transportation cyclist, I am also in favor of protected bike lanes on direct route streets. But, bike lanes are often not built because it would require removal or reduction in public street parking.

And, apparently, it requires more than 50 percent of residents on a city block to agree to remove the parking. It just doesn't seem right that residents can block a bike lane, needed to provide safety for a less polluting transportation mode, but they can't ask for a different pedestrian safety solution.

There are other arguments to be made, but, again, I think it's hard for many people to look beyond the "streets are for cars" paradigm and even imagine that we could restrict them, slow them, tame them, and deprioritize them to make some streets be for people. But, I hope you might look at this as an opportunity to imagine it.

Cathy Van Maren

1 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1361920924003146> "The impact of a low traffic neighbourhood intervention on urban noise measured with low-cost sensors in Oxford, UK"

2 <https://inews.co.uk/news/environment/low-traffic-neighbourhoods-fewer-cars-less-pollution-safer-streets-2514645> "Fewer cars, less pollution, safer streets: examining the evidence on low-traffic neighbourhoods"

3 <https://lgiu.org/blog-article/one-step-beyond-low-traffic-neighbourhoods-as-a-catalyst-for-community-change/> "One step beyond: low traffic neighbourhoods as a catalyst for community change"