

LA's Sidewalk Repair Program: Needs Money, Needs Management but Has a Lot Going for It

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LA WATCHDOG--In 2007, the Bureau of Street Services estimated that the cost to repair our 4,600 miles of broken sidewalks was in the range of \$1.2 billion. However, since that time, our City's "leaders" have made very little, if any, progress in addressing the sorry state of our 10,750 miles of sidewalks that comprise over 2% of the City's land mass.

Fortunately, on April Fools' Day of last year, the City announced that it had reached what appears to be an excellent settlement of the Willetts v. City of Los Angeles class action lawsuit. This will require the City to spend almost \$1.4 billion over the next thirty years to "ensure better access for persons with mobile disabilities to the City's sidewalks, curb ramps, crosswalks, pedestrian crossings, and other walkways."

Unfortunately, residential neighborhoods are last in line which is why four Councilmembers (Krekorian, Buscaino, Bonin, and Martinez) have developed a Sidewalk Repair Policy (consisting of eleven elements) that outlines a more comprehensive program to accelerate the repair our broken sidewalks.

There are some attractive features to this program, including incentive programs whereby the City will reimburse property owners for approximately 50% of the repair cost if the work is done within the next three years. The City has also proposed twenty year warranties on residential repairs, including those made by private contractors. In return, the City wants to limit its future liability for sidewalks by entering into a “fix and release” program where property owners will be responsible for their sidewalks, including those damaged by trees.

Importantly, the City will also focus on preserving and enhancing our Urban Forest.

There are two major flaws in this Sidewalk Repair Policy: the lack of any definitive sources of funding and the overall management of the Sidewalk Repair Program.

Under the Willetts class action settlement, the City is required to spend \$31 million a year for the next five years, most of which is earmarked for the repair of City’s own sidewalks. But this amount is just a drop in the bucket compared to the estimated \$1.5 to \$2 billion that is needed to repair the City’s 4,600 miles of broken sidewalks.

[Note: This estimate needs to be confirmed as it may have been developed assuming that 100% of a property’s sidewalks need to be repaired when only 10% of the segments are damaged. This issue was raised in 2014 by Paul Krekorian.]

The City may develop an awesome Sidewalk Repair Program. But for it to be effective, are the Herb Wesson led City Council and the Mayor Eric Garcetti willing to allocate scarce resources to fund the acceleration of this vital infrastructure program over the next ten to fifteen years?

The management and organizational structure of the Sidewalk Repair Program is lacking. Rather than having defined lines of authority reporting to a General Manager who is responsible for the entire program, there are too many cooks in the kitchen, (graphic above) not dissimilar to the situation involving our Department of Water and Power.

Like DWP, there appears to be too many Councilmembers sticking their nose into the kitchen, putting their own self-interest ahead what is best for the City. This is certainly the case with Jose Huizar who submitted a written comment to the Council File (14-0163-S3) that would require the funding to be spread equally between Council Districts and that the annual plan for each Council District to be subject to approval by the Councilmember.

Krekorian, Buscaino, Bonin, and Martinez have done a very good job of outlining an eleven element Sidewalk Repair Program and submitting 21 recommendations (ordered by element) for the City Council's approval. But now they need to make sure that this Program is properly funded and properly managed, not an easy task given the City's budget constraints and the egos of the Councilmembers and the Mayor.

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