

Residents turn out en masse to protest Port sidewalk plan

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM

Wednesday, 19 June 2013 18:10 - Last Updated Wednesday, 19 June 2013 18:23

Property owners facing assessments tell council they don't want walkways

Special assessments to pay for new sidewalks that will be installed in the City of Port Washington this summer brought a crowd of about 20 people to Common Council meeting Tuesday.

Many argued that the sidewalks planned in front of their homes aren't needed.

"It's not going to serve a purpose," Tom Caravella, 404 Westport Dr., said. "I don't know why you're doing this."

Caravella and his neighbor Don Laubenstein, 405 Summit Dr., said that although parents drop off and pick up students at Dunwiddie Elementary School in front of their homes, they won't use the walkways.

"They run across the street," Caravella said.

John Poull, president of the Birchwood Hills Condominium Association, asked that the city consider alternatives to extending sidewalks on both sides of Parknoll Lane. Sidewalks along the street currently end abruptly, and the city's plan would continue them north to Highway LL.

Poull suggested the city either add sidewalk only to the east side of the street and come up with a cost-sharing plan or link the existing sidewalk to the Ozaukee Interurban Trail, which runs behind the condominiums.

Poull, of 4761 Upper Forest Beach Rd., noted that the entrances to the 40 condominium units lead to the parking lots, not the street, making it unlikely the sidewalk would be used by residents.

"Birchwood Hills is served by paved public streets soon to be resurfaced and the Interurban Bike Trail," he said. "The duplication of this (by adding sidewalks) is unnecessarily costly and ecologically unsound."

Installing sidewalks would likely result in runoff and resulting damage to property, as well as less vegetation in the area, Poull said.

Thomas Ruscher, 1893 Parknoll La., said he is concerned the added runoff will cause flooding in his building.

He also questioned how widely the new sidewalk would be used, saying he and his wife have only seen five people traverse the area in the last month.

"I think we're trying to solve a problem that doesn't exist," he said. "I really have to wonder whether, with the expense of this, it's really money put to good use."

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But not everyone agreed.

Grace Hernandez, 1736 Parknoll La., said the sidewalk runs in front of her property but not along the opposite side of the street.

“They (pedestrians) are always on our property,” she said. “Why do we on our side always have to put up with the traffic?”

Rhema Bonde, 1800 Parknoll La., told aldermen she wants the city to design the sidewalks so two mature maple trees on her property don't have to be cut down.

“I can see where you would want to put in sidewalk,” she said. “But I don't want my trees to go. They're beautiful trees.”

Poull said the city could arrange for an easement with the Birchwood Hills association so it could install a bike path linking Parknoll Lane to the Interurban Trail and Port Catholic School.

He also asked that the city consider adding a shelter with a water fountain near the area where the Interurban Trail meets Seven Hills Road.

The estimated sidewalk assessments for homeowners would range from \$57 to \$3,104, with the work done in conjunction with road construction slated for the summer, according to city officials.

The homes in question primarily abut Seven Hills Road, Parknoll Lane and Second Avenue on the city's north and west sides.

Laubenstein questioned why his property is slated for sidewalks, noting the street work will not extend to the area in front of his home on Summit Drive.

“I don't see why I have to pay \$3,100 and I'm getting no street work,” he said. “We've lived in this house for 47 years, and nobody walks in the grass there.”

Public Works Director Rob Vanden Noven said that at the February public informational meeting on the road projects, a woman asked the city to install sidewalk in the area to make it safer for students attending Dunwiddie School.

The city's policy is to assesses property owners to install sidewalk, but not charge them when the walkways require repairs in the future, Vanden Noven said.

The city generally seeks to install sidewalks on both sides of its streets, and to eliminate areas where the walkways suddenly end by extending the sidewalks to adjoining streets, he said.

That's the case on Parknoll Lane, which ends north of Highway LL, he said. The new sidewalk will ultimately connect to a walkway being installed along Highway LL east to

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Wisconsin Street.

A public information meeting on the road projects was held in February and the work approved by the Common Council this spring.

Bids for the projects have been awarded, although the city is waiting for the contracts to be signed, Vanden Noven said. Work is expected to begin in mid-July.

The final assessments won't be determined until the project is completed, he said.

Vanden Noven said there is still time for the city to modify the street and sidewalk plans before work begins.

Aldermen are expected to discuss the assessments further when they meet on Monday, July 1.