

Ann Arbor Sustainability and Transportation Commissions Joint Statement of Support for the Implementation of Sidewalk Gap Filling Projects

We believe that Ann Arbor's *Moving Together Towards Vision Zero* plan, which is centered on eliminating traffic-related deaths and serious injuries, is critical to creating a safe, inclusive, and vibrant city for everyone, whether walking, biking, driving, or taking transit. Since Ann Arbor City Council adopted R-11-088, *Resolution Proclaiming the City of Ann Arbor's Commitment to Complete Streets*, filling sidewalk gaps has been elevated as a high priority in multiple city planning documents. Completing our sidewalk network is a key strategy in *Vision Zero* and supports Ann Arbor's climate goals by encouraging alternative modes of transportation, as outlined in the *A²ZERO* plan. As we work to advance *Vision Zero*, the city remains equally committed to protecting and enhancing our urban tree canopy. These priorities – safe, connected streets and environmental stewardship – are part of a broader, shared vision of sustainability, equity, and high quality of life for all.

Tree-lined streets are central to Ann Arbor's character. Walking beneath mature oaks and maples is emblematic of our city. Trees contribute essential ecosystem benefits to our community. City-managed trees function as green infrastructure, helping manage stormwater while improving air and water quality, reducing summer heat, supporting biodiversity, strengthening resilience, sequestering carbon, and improving quality of life. The city invests significant resources to sustainably manage the urban forest, as documented in the Ann Arbor Urban and Community Forest Management Plan (Forest Management Plan), which establishes canopy coverage and long-term stewardship goals.

At the same time, the city has identified areas without sidewalks, where the absence of safe pedestrian infrastructure limits access and mobility. Sidewalk gaps make it harder for people of all ages and abilities to fully participate in the community. Expanding the sidewalk network also provides opportunities for people to shift their mode of travel. *Vision Zero* and *A²ZERO* have a shared goal of reducing single occupancy vehicle trips by 50% and building a mobility system that produces zero emissions. Ensuring the community has more opportunities for people to walk, bike, scoot, and take public transit helps meet these goals.

In some locations, existing street trees are located within the public right-of-way where sidewalk gap-filling projects are planned. These trees are city-owned public assets, and their preservation is a priority – the city benefits by retaining as many existing mature trees as possible. As such, each potentially impacted tree is carefully evaluated by city staff, considering tree health, ecological and stormwater benefits, size, and long-term viability. Multiple departments collaborate to identify sidewalk placement and design solutions that avoid removal whenever feasible. While site constraints vary, potential design strategies to preserve trees may include: curving sidewalks where sufficient right-of-way exists, adjusting

curbs to work around trees where roadway width allows, and/or securing an easement from the adjacent property owner to allow a sidewalk path on private property.

All alternatives are thoroughly evaluated before a decision is made. City staff weigh engineering feasibility, cost, safety, accessibility requirements, and tree preservation to determine the most appropriate design. The city works with project-adjacent residents to pursue solutions that retain trees while delivering safe and accessible sidewalks.

In some circumstances, no practicable alternative exists. In those cases, tree removal may be necessary to construct a functional sidewalk for all users. When removal of a city-owned street tree is unavoidable, a canopy loss fee based on tree size is required. These funds are transferred from the sidewalk millage to the Stormwater Utility and reinvested in planting new street trees and maintaining existing canopy in accordance with the Forest Management Plan. This ensures that necessary canopy loss is mitigated and long-term urban forest goals remain protected.

As city commissions, we've engaged city staff and heard a wide range of perspectives. While supporting the city's current sidewalk gap filling project implementation, the commissions and city staff jointly identified some areas for improvement. Moving forward, the city staff commit to:

- Updating the internal workflow between city departments to clearly document the tree evaluation and removal process for capital projects, including canopy loss fee tracking for improved metrics reporting.
- Enhancing public education materials to include an informational sheet to residents detailing environmental protections during sidewalk gap filling projects, and potential alternative design options.
- Exploring ways to further integrate environmental considerations into transportation policy implementation.

We thank the city staff that are acting thoughtfully and with care to fulfill City Council's direction while navigating the difficult balance between transportation needs and environmental stewardship. We are equally grateful to the many residents who have spoken with honesty, care, and a desire for solutions.

With this shared statement, the commissions express unified support for the Sidewalk Gap Filling Program and the city's adaptive approach to implementation. We affirm that safe, connected streets and environmental stewardship are essential to achieving a sustainable and equitable future for Ann Arbor.

Signed,

-The Sustainability and Transportation Commissions

