POUNDING THE PAVEMENT

Seniors study city's sidewalk conditions

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FALL RIVER — Drivers whizzing through intersections and over city streets may complain of potholes, but some of Fall River's sidewalks could rival even the deepest of road craters.

Walkers, especially the elderly and disabled, can attest to the sometimes deplorable conditions of city sidewalks.

"There's nothing like getting out of the car and walking," said Julie Kelly, coordinator of Mass in Motion, who implemented a project to audit city neighborhoods that get the most foot traffic.

A group of walkers, called "senior champions," took to the streets and looked for things that can impede and even hurt walkers. Potholes, tree stumps, narrow walkways and faded — or altogether missing — crosswalks were a few of the hazards they searched out and easily found.

"If we can improve walking conditions for seniors, we are improving them for the entire community," Kelly said.

Walk audits were conducted around the Flint Senior Center, with travel along Pleasant Street to Cottell Heights, Father Travassos Park, Walmart and Britland Park, as well as an audit of the Niagara/Maplewood Senior Center area and one at North Park.

On Pleasant Street, a group of walkers auditing the Flint from the senior center found that crosswalks were few and far between, and the sidewalk was damaged across from Cottell Tower on Webster Street. There was also a lack of curb cuts around Espirito Santo Church, making travel dangerous for disabled people. Other problems, like holes, were regarded as tripping hazards.

On another day, the group surveyed the intersection of Pleasant and Quarry streets and found it a particular safety concern.

SUBMITTED PHOTOS

Above, from left, Laura Lopes and Annette Audette walk over cracked sidewalks on Quequechan Street during a walk audit in the Flint neighborhood. At left, from left, Audette, Julie Kelly, Marcia Picard, Kathy Duclos and Ben B. take part in a walk through the Flint.

The senior champions discovered a lack of curb cuts in the area, faded crosswalks, no speed-limit signs heading south in the area of the Dollar Tree, uneven sloping sidewalks, cracked and deteriorated sidewalks and uprooted bricks around trees.

"You're in the car all the time, sometimes you don't notice the sidewalks are so poor," senior champion Kathy Duclos said. "I just couldn't believe it was that bad."

They also noted a busy bus stop in front of Price Rite supermarket, where there was no bench or shelter and people were sitting on the cement waiting for a bus.

Overgrowth and trash was another problem encountered by the senior champions. One problem area was Alden Street, where overgrowth emanated from mill properties and garbage barrels blocked sidewalks.

Heavy overgrowth and litter was found on Quequechan Street between the new Walmart and Quarry Street. Tucker and Rodman streets were other problem areas.

"Since we started the project, I found that potholes have been patched and crosswalks have been improved," senior champion Paul DeVillers said.

Kelly said some of the sidewalk repairs go beyond quick fixes and will likely become city projects.

The initiative — Healthy Aging Through Healthy Design Champions, a program of the Massachusetts Council on Aging and Department of Public Health — awarded Fall River a $10,000 grant to make improvements that would help seniors maintain good health.

Partners for a Healthier Community received the award, which was implemented by Mass in Motion. The grant paid for an organizer, Eric Andrade, to oversee the project.

"I was surprised that the group was so enthusiastic about the audits," Andrade said. "We realized, being out there, there are things you don't notice in a car."

WalkBoston, a statewide pedestrian advocacy organization, participated in the project and met with city department heads in traffic, planning, engineering and police, while also offering training on conducting walk audits.

The group also worked with Pauline Gousie, director of the Fall River Council on Aging, the Disability Commission, and neighborhood associations.

"I learned a lot," senior champion Kathy Lowney said. "Reflecting on it, I feel like it's a really important project. It should be continued in some way. It was a good start."

Senior champion Richard Lopes and his wife, Laura Lopes, were both participants.

"It's nice to see that people are concerned about the streets and sidewalks," Richard Lopes said.

Laura Lopes knows firsthand how sidewalk hazards can be a danger. She tripped on an uneven sidewalk on Highland Avenue in July and fractured her shoulder.

Kelly said the project is being presented to city departments.

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