Pedestrian Passage Corridors for Sidewalks

A successful, ideal sidewalk system would be 60” wide throughout its length, would be free of obstructions, and meet all cross slope and longitudinal slope requirements. But even when such a sidewalk system is constructed, it often falls victim to temporary or incremental encroachments that limit its available capacity for pedestrians, particularly those in the disabled community. For example, available sidewalk widths can be lost to trash cans, expanding trees and shrubs, encroaching grass or ground covers, or low mounted signage.

Vegetative encroachments take the form of shade trees, shrubs, ground cover, flowers, and grass. They are often benign when first planted, but over time, they increasingly cover more of the sidewalk or, in the case of grass and flowers, may present a seasonal disruption. Because these happen gradually, they tend to go unnoticed until they are more difficult to manage because they have been entrenched for so long.
Other encroachments are temporary or intermittent, as in the case of trash cans or work zone signage. These can be even less anticipated than some of the vegetative encroachments and can be frustrating to disabled pedestrians who anticipate a clear pathway.
Encroachments can best be understood when we remind ourselves that the disabled community extends well beyond those in wheelchairs. For that matter, electric wheelchairs might be easier to navigate across grass or ground cover encroachment than a manual chair. Low vision or blind persons might find no ground level indications of trees or shrubs with their canes, only to walk into low handing branches, possibly falling in the process. Those with gait impairments may have even other difficulties with some of these encroachments.

To make the most of sidewalk systems, regardless of whether they are ideal or not in their physical construction, a system of local ordinances can be helpful to retain the passage plane or corridor and avoid unnecessary obstructions, even on a temporary basis. Similar to local ordinances that require residents to mow their grass at some point, a local ordinance can prohibit trash cans on sidewalks and can require residents to prune trees and bushes and edge sidewalk grass or ground cover. Similarly, policies for the erection of permanent and temporary signage above 84” can avoid any conflicts.

The Delaware T² Center’s full-time Engineer position was established with the primary mission of providing transportation advice and technical assistance to Delaware municipalities. Contact Matt Carter at matheu@udel.edu or at (302) 831-7236 for assistance.

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