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Title: Who Sweeps the Sidewalks?

Abstract: The common appearance of sidewalks contradicts their unique significance as an irreplaceable component of public goods. Local governments are widely considered to take primary responsibility for sidewalks, but other organizations may also step in the field. Due to the involvement of diverse groups and high costs of maintaining sidewalks, local governments have adopted varied strategies to overcome financial deficits and inefficiency. Cooperation between local governments and property owners has become an inevitable trend to collect funding, to share risks, and to balance control of sidewalk pavement and maintenance.

Introduction

Sidewalks are standardized pieces of gray concrete, used for the pedestrian paths between roads and buildings. Separated from motorized traffic, sidewalks take us to our destinations by providing safe paths for people to walk efficiently. As a public area where people stop, observe and interact, sidewalks also extend stores, enhance public safety, and provide open spaces for children to play (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009). I argue that sidewalks are public goods, and their main benefits can be attributed to three aspects: (a) effectively reducing vehicle miles traveled and car emissions, (b) encouraging drivers to choose lower and safer speeds, and (c) lowering rates of obesity, cardiovascular disease, and other health issues related to sedentary lifestyles (Anne, 2010).

1. Building and Maintaining Sidewalks

The responsibility of paving and maintaining sidewalks often rests on local governments. Sidewalks are so basic to all economic and social activities that they require a degree of central planning and control of commercial, social, and environmental effects (Chris, 2005). In particular, sidewalks are usually located in public areas, which host a series of activities that overlay and thereby become sites of social interaction and also conflict. The conflicts over competition for limited space can motivate local governments to regulate sidewalks. Sidewalks are closely associated with abutting buildings, and the way that they are built and used affects the tenants and users of these buildings. The complexity arising from multiple interests of various groups overlapping on the same narrow stretches of sidewalk leads to a need for uniformed and centralized sidewalk administration (Roger, 2005). Cities use multiple strategies to govern sidewalk activities, including local ordinances, development
incentives, and land regulations. In most cases, municipalities are liable for accidents that occur on sidewalks.

2. Paying for Sidewalks

Even though a sidewalk may go through private property, it is considered public property and its construction is usually paid for by local governments. However, in order to share maintenance costs and potential risks, municipal authorities may make property owners repair sidewalks by offering incentive mechanisms, or they can repair sidewalks and assess the cost to the adjacent property owners (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009).

Policies for funding sidewalks have varied in different cities over different periods. Before the passage of the Highway Revenue Act of 1956, the revenues generated from the gas tax were partly bound to public infrastructure spending. From 1911 to 1978, Los Angeles property owners were responsible for the upkeep of sidewalks. Finding that the property owners failed to maintain sidewalks effectively, the city took over the responsibility for upkeep in 1978. The local government of Los Angeles ran out of money in two years, unable to finance sidewalk maintenance in the long run. At present, some cities require property owners to pay for sidewalk repairs, but they also offer options to ease the burden. Minneapolis property owners, for example, can hire their own contractors, use a city-hired contractor and let the city bill them or roll the cost into their property taxes. San Diego offers a cost-sharing program and will pay half the repair costs for sidewalks that meet certain requirements (Stephanie, 2013).

With the development of modern cities, authorities have been seeking the most appropriate method to pay for sidewalks. I believe that local governments and property owners should cooperate with each other and figure out a sustainable strategy for sidewalk pavement and maintenance.

3. Difficulties in Maintaining Sidewalks

In essence, sidewalks are open to all; however, they are most closely associated with abutting property owners. Some property owners regard it as their own responsibility to keep the sidewalks free from obstructions and sometimes to keep them in good repair (Lofland, 1998), though other property owners may refuse to do so. The misunderstandings of responsibility for sidewalks can cause unnecessary duplicated investments in some sidewalks, while leaving others unsupervised, causing potential conflicts between local governments and property owners. This intrinsic and internal difficulty should not be ignored.

The most obvious difficulty is the financial problem for local governments in the face of the need to manage deficits. Compared with markets, the government is widely claimed to be
inefficient and unresponsive (Giuliano, 2007). The requests for sidewalk maintenance or improvement may not be promptly addressed, resulting in higher risks of accidents and danger. Furthermore, there has been increasing recognition that local governments lack strong incentives to achieve high-quality services at minimum cost, resulting in mass waste of funds and resources (Chris, 2005).

4. Solutions

Significant decreases in federal and states’ funding to local governments are driving municipalities and municipal planners to become more creative with new methods to meet the demands for local infrastructures and public facilities.

Many municipalities have realized that the cooperation between government and private sectors truly makes a difference in long-term infrastructure maintenance. Compared with local governments, private companies are considered more flexible and responsive to their customers, and better able to survive in an increasingly competitive globalization. In private companies, the management of operators and infrastructure providers, motivated by profits, can set priorities appropriately and impartially. Politicians would need to make explicit arrangements, through regulation, taxes, or subsidy to achieve their political and social objectives (Vickers & Yarrow, 1998).

Business Improvement Districts (BID) are public-private partnerships that are enabled by the state, enacted by municipal governments after petitions from property owners, and governed by the city’s regulations and a governing board. Property or business owners within such districts pay additional taxes or assessments that are returned to the association to spend on services or capital improvements (Houstoun, 1997). The city of Los Angeles, for example, encouraged BID development by marketing the districts and by providing start-up funds and consultants to interested business groups (Dickerson, 1999).

To make immediate progress on funding infrastructure, impact fees can be assessed by municipalities upon developers for sidewalk improvements necessitated as a direct result of the proposed development. In addition, the Indexed Road User Toll on Energy (RoUTE) provides an efficient, predictable, sustainable mechanism for providing a base of financing for the infrastructures, such as sidewalks (Greene, 2011).

Several other alternative approaches to support construction and maintenance of sidewalks exist. The Routine Accommodation and Opportunistic Improvement are two strategies which fund healthier places for walking and cycling. Routine Accommodation, a standard practice that assures a town ends up with a complete network of sidewalks, requires complete streets, thereby accommodating pedestrians and bicyclists in absolutely all new
construction and redevelopment. Opportunistic Improvement builds sidewalks at reduced cost during other construction activities, such as sewers, underground utility work, and road resurfacing. As for capital improvements, many cities and towns have a small but regular portion of the budget annually dedicated to sidewalk construction and maintenance (Mark, 2003).

A combination of the above methods is probably the most appropriate solution to collecting funding for infrastructure maintenance. Collaboration between public sectors (municipalities) and private sectors (property owners) can share investment risks and complement each other.

5. Conclusions
Suffering from inadequate funds and disappointing efficiency, municipalities creatively utilize a mix of tools to make both immediate and long-term progress on sidewalk demand and maintenance. Neither a totally centralized regulatory system, in which local governments set precise targets for all levels of infrastructure provision, nor a totally decentralized system, in which the property owners are left relatively free to regulate themselves, will produce an optimal output (Caillaud et al. 1996). Some coordination between the local governments and property owners is desirable to guarantee that sidewalks serve the public with high efficiency. In addition, other programs, such as Opportunistic Improvement, also facilitate financing and maintaining sidewalks to a great extent. Due to the ever-changing economic and social environment, local municipalities are expected to flexibly adjust strategies of funding sidewalks, addressing both current and potential challenges in sidewalk pavement and maintenance.

References


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