

# Homeowners Can't Ignore Sidewalks

By ANN CAMERON SIEGAL  
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Often there is no safe way to get around them—the cracks, mounding, gouges and overgrowth that can make sidewalks hazardous.

When someone trips, stubs a toe, twists an ankle or has trouble maneuvering a wheelchair or walker, the question arises: "Who's responsible for this?"

If a public sidewalk abuts your property, you are. A property owner's responsibility goes beyond keeping sidewalks free of snow and ice. A property owner also is expected to take an active role in preventing sidewalk accidents by performing basic maintenance and by alerting local authorities to possible hazards.

Basic maintenance is largely common sense. Regular sweeping keeps grass, leaves and other debris from accumulating, thus avoiding slipping hazards. In addition, grass and weeds should be prevented from growing between bricks or concrete sidewalk panels and along the curb lines. Such vegetation hastens the deterioration of walkways and gutters.

And don't just look down. Robert A. Brubaker, director of Metropec Inc., an Alexandria-based advocate for walkers, devotes part of his Web site ([www.metropec.org](http://www.metropec.org)) to pedestrian hazards that are "seldom addressed," including overhanging branches and overgrown shrubs. Plans that encroach on walkways can be just as hazardous as surface problems because they can force pedestri-

## They're Your Problem

*Keep your eyes out for sidewalk issues. Homeowners are responsible for maintenance.*



**Tree roots** are a major cause of sidewalk problems. Trees planted in the utility strip don't have room to grow.



**Homeowners are required** to tell officials about hazards such as this.

PHOTOS BY ANN CAMERON SIEGAL

ans to step into the street to avoid scrapes and scratches.

Shrubs and branches should be cut back to the property line. Municipalities have various rules that cover such plants. In Laurel, for example, the code dictates that overhanging branches must be at least seven feet above the sidewalk.

In Alexandria, if city crews have to come out to

trim a homeowner's plans, the cost goes on the homeowner's tax bill, said Brett Sweeney, head of maintenance in the city's Department of Transportation and Environmental Services.

It may seem obvious what constitutes a tripping

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# Sidewalk Upkeep Is Another Duty Of Property Owners

SIDEWALKS. From *H*

hazard, but municipalities have very precise definitions. In Alexandria, for example, a hazard is any deviation in grade of 1 3/4 inches or any depression in which a high-heel shoe could get caught.

In Laurel, Teddy R. Dulaney, the director of public works, said that only a 3/4-inch deviation in grade or any crack more than an inch wide requires a repair. On: square foot of spalling—when the top layer starts to crumble—will also put a sidewalk section on the list for replacement.

In the District, there are no specific definitions. Tripping hazards are decided case by case, said Bill Rice, spokesman for the D.C. Transportation Department.

"We encourage people to call our citywide call center whenever they see something that is a problem," Rice said. The report is supposed to be logged; callers get tracking numbers to monitor the

conditions, the possibility of damage by vehicles and because "trees actually provide better shade when set back from the road," according to the town's Web site.

Developers in Alexandria are experimenting with new measures to give roots near sidewalks more favorable growing conditions. In the Carlyle development, for example, continuous soil-filled underground tree troughs, parallel to the curb, allow roots to expand more than in traditional 4-by-6-foot wells.

At the Samuel Madden Homes, a former public housing project that is being redeveloped into mixed-income townhouses, a hybrid tree well is being tried. It combines features of the tree trough with a cantilevered well around three sides of the tree. Jeff Farnor of the Alexandria Planning and Zoning Department said the goal is to maintain the sidewalks for pedestrians while providing tree roots as much soil as possible.

## Hazards Underfoot

*There's much more to sidewalk care than shoveling snow.*



**A tripping hazard** should be called to the attention of the local government.



**A temporary fix**—in this case, old asphalt—minimizes hazard until permanent repairs can be made.



**Overgrown shrubs** force pedestrians to walk in the street.



**New brick** is more hazardous than old because it is still settling and tends to get out of grade easily.



**Overhanging branches** block pedestrians.



**Grass growing in crevices** along sidewalks is hazardous and speeds sidewalk deterioration.