

Cost-sharing program swamped by repair orders

By Lisa Mascaro, Staff Writer
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A 7-month-old program that lets Los Angeles homeowners split the cost of sidewalk repair with City Hall - rather than waiting 80 years for service - has been inundated with so many requests that new applicants are being turned away. Some 500 property owners, including nearly 150 in the San Fernando Valley, have applied for the 50-50 Sidewalk Program since July 1, agreeing to pay an average of \$1,200 per household to get the broken, buckled and cracked concrete fixed in front of their homes. "The response has been really overwhelming," said Bill Robertson, director of the Bureau of Street Services. "Now we have to concentrate on getting everybody caught up."

Councilwoman Wendy Greuel, who launched the 50-50 program in her East Valley district last year before convincing her colleagues to expand it citywide, is pushing to have it continued in fiscal 2006-07.

"It just speaks volumes about its importance," Greuel said. "Waiting 85 years to fix sidewalks we know about, that doesn't work."

The city launched the program for fiscal 2005-06 by allocating \$1.4 million from the general fund, in addition to the \$9 million already budgeted for sidewalk repairs. After hearing from 15 to 20 residents a day, the city closed the program to new applicants at the first of the year. The backlog is so great that Robertson expects it will be June 30 before all the orders are complete. Robertson said he hasn't been able to hire enough workers to meet the demand. Only half the nearly two dozen positions created with the additional funding have been filled because of the slow hiring process.

So far, homeowners have paid more than \$800,000 into the program, and 80 of the 500 sidewalk projects have been completed. Those homeowners who have received city estimates but haven't yet committed with a payment have until Tuesday to decide whether to proceed. But even with the overwhelming interest from homeowners willing to pay for repairs, it will still take decades to catch up with the thousands of miles of city sidewalks that have fallen into disrepair.

University of California, Los Angeles, professor Donald Shoup has floated the idea of having property owners pay for sidewalk repairs when they sell their homes, and the proposal is being discussed at City Hall. "Even though the 50-50 program has been a success, it's not going to solve the sidewalk (problem). There's not enough people out there that are willing to get their sidewalks done and pay the cost," Robertson said.

The city's backlog of sidewalk repairs is legendary. Of the 10,750 miles of sidewalks, the largest municipal network in the nation, 4,600 miles are damaged and in need of repair. Robertson blamed a lot of the sidewalk problem on roots from trees the city planted to beautify neighborhoods in booming L.A. "All those trees that were planted in the '60s and '70s were growing and making more projects for us. Every year more and more sidewalks are being damaged," he said.

During the suburban building boom of the 1950s and '60s, residents were responsible for maintaining the sidewalks in front of their homes, and the city would cite them for problems. City crews would make the fixes, then bill homeowners for the work through property taxes, Robertson said. In the 1970s, federal grants allowed the city to hire crews to make repairs. Once that money dried up, the responsibility reverted to homeowners, who were vehemently opposed. By 1974, the City Council had decided that property owners were responsible for sidewalk maintenance unless the concrete was damaged by parkway trees. The city would then send out crews to make repairs - using ugly black tar to patch the breaks.

In 1998, voters rejected Proposition JJ, a 20-year, \$20 parcel tax that would have generated \$700 million for sidewalk repair. A year later, the city created a sidewalk replacement fund, allocating a fluctuating amount from the city's general fund. This year, the city has allocated \$9 million for sidewalk repairs, enough to fix just 52 miles of cracked concrete. At that rate, it would take 80 years to get a sidewalk repaired with anything more than a black tar patch. Meanwhile, the city spends between \$2 million and \$6 million annually in liability payouts for claims filed by people who get hurt tripping on broken sidewalks.

Residents remain mixed over whether they or the city should pay for sidewalks. Arleta resident Yousef Elia Haddad didn't hesitate to sign up once he heard about the 50-50 program. He had been trying for seven years to repair his sidewalk, which has been buckled by tree roots that stretch all the way to the front of his house. City crews patched the triangular break in the sidewalk, using the black tar - but Haddad wants a permanent fix and has already paid his \$1,600 share. "I feel bad I have to pay for it. This is caused by the city planning, city property damaging our property," said the Jordanian immigrant, who has lived in his home since 1980 and is vice president of the Arleta Neighborhood Council. "But I have no choice; which other choice do I have? If they're not going to fix it, what is better to have, a kid from the street get injured?"

Around the corner from him, resident Christina Garcia has settled for the black patch but refuses to pay for the permanent fix, even though her disabled child uses a wheelchair and finds the sidewalk difficult to navigate. "Our (property) taxes, you know, are \$7,000. I just don't feel I should pay for that," said Garcia, who bought the home last year. "It's senseless. If we have to pay taxes, we should all be able to utilize that funding."

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