

Let's Get Serious About Fixing Sidewalks

By Michael Pollack

They're a vital public resource, but cities don't manage or maintain them well. There is plenty they could be doing.

In the last few weeks, a number of cities—communities as diverse as Philadelphia; Atlanta; South Bend, Indiana; and Beaumont, College Station, and Georgetown, Texas—have announced meaningful changes in the management and provision of a crucial public resource.

These changes include hiring new officials, infusing additional capital, changing how that capital is raised, and committing to expanding availability. In doing so, these cities follow in the footsteps of Denver; Ithaca, New York; and others by taking significant steps toward improving public life.

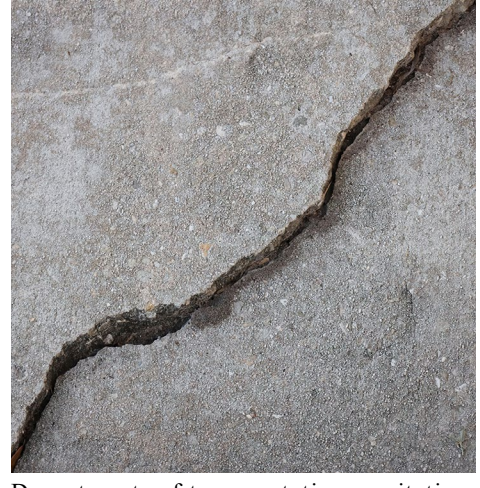
This resource? The often overlooked sidewalk. As I explain in my forthcoming book, *Sidewalk Nation*, public rights of way like sidewalks are essential for communities, businesses, residents, and governments alike. By essential, I don't mean

that *having them* is essential. Rather, effectively maintaining and regulating them is what is vital. Indeed, simply having sidewalks without this kind of oversight can be even worse than not having them at all.

Unique among all public spaces, sidewalks inherently entail a sprawling collision among uses. We travel on sidewalks—to work, to school, to recreation. We also engage in commerce on sidewalks—from outdoor dining to advertising, vendors, delivery robots, scooter rentals, and more. We socialize and protest there. It's where we put infrastructure that keeps the city running, such as utility poles and lighting. Some people even sit and sleep there.

Each of these uses competes for limited space, and the space each one takes leaves less for the others. But because none of these uses is necessarily "better" than the others, the goal must be to harmonize them.

That's where too many cities and towns have fallen short. First, in many cities, scattered parts of city government regulate these uses, and they don't always coordinate very well.



Departments of transportation, sanitation, buildings, consumer affairs, health, and more all overlap on the sidewalk. Without seeing the whole picture, regulators can leave gaps or create unintended clashes.

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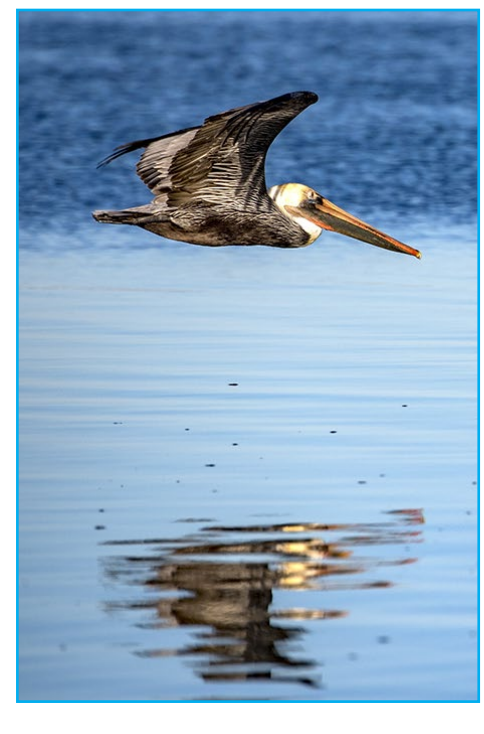
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Contact: Brian Hopkins, 401-528-4575, brian.hopkins@sba.gov
Fee: Free; registration required

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Federal Contracting for Small Businesses Webinar
Tuesday, June 9, 2026, 11:00 am–12:30 pm CDT Online
Main Sponsor(s): US Small Business Administration
Contact: Irene Gonzalez, 208-334-1673, irene.gonzalez@sba.gov
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Federal Contracting: Woman-Owned Small Business (WOSB) Certification Program Webinar
Tuesday, June 16, 2026, 1:00 pm–3:00 pm CDT Online
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Contact: Patrice Dozier, patrice.dozier@sba.gov
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