

Richard W. Kedzior
3521 Lucia Crest
Madison, WI 53705

January 17, 2024

Michael Cullen
Chair, Board of Public Works

Dear Mr. Cullen,

I am writing to you about the Harvey Street sidewalk portion of the Schmitt Place/Harvey Street reconstruction project that was approved by the Board of Public Works (BPW) on October 18, 2023. I reside in north Sunset Village near Harvey Street on Lucia Crest. I also serve as Treasurer of the Sunset Village Community Association (SVCA). Only recently have I been able to listen to the recording of the meeting leading to approval of new sidewalk only on the north side of Harvey Street. I was very concerned by the inaccurate statements made during the meeting, which might have swayed the board to approve the revised design that omitted the construction of sidewalk on the south side of Harvey Street between Blackhawk Avenue and 3325 Harvey Street. I believe this omission to be a serious error.

North Sunset Village residents have been trying to get infill sidewalks built in the neighborhood for several years, especially on Harvey Street and Blackhawk Avenue. In November 2019, several neighbors and I sent the enclosed letter to Mayor Rhodes-Conway requesting that the city construct sidewalks on both sides of Harvey Street. This request was prompted by the poor pedestrian safety conditions on Harvey Street and the fact that City Engineering had omitted consideration of sidewalk in the 2020 Blackhawk Avenue reconstruction project. I later engaged with City Engineering on improving the design of the Blackhawk Avenue project in order to improve pedestrian safety. City Engineering then reduced some corner curb radii and added curb cuts for future curb ramps on Blackhawk Ave at the northeast and southeast corners of the intersection with Harvey Street (see enclosed photograph).

In 2022, I was informed by City Engineering that Harvey Street sidewalks could be added to the Schmitt Place/Harvey Street reconstruction project. In my role as a member of the SVCA executive committee, I sponsored a resolution supporting construction of sidewalks on Harvey Street. The enclosed resolution was passed by SVCA on February 16, 2023 with only one vote in opposition.

With limited notification to the neighborhood (perhaps only to Harvey Street residents), the city held a public information meeting in early October 2023. I was personally notified of the PIM by city staff. Support for sidewalks during the meeting was strong. Support for retaining trees was also strong, especially by a few people who own property on the south side of Harvey Street. Not long after the meeting, in my role as a member of the SVCA executive committee, I requested that City Engineering meet with some neighborhood residents who were concerned about redesigning the proposed sidewalks to see if some trees along Harvey Street could be spared. I believe this meeting/field review, led by Steve Sonntag, occurred on October 10th. I was not able to attend this meeting because of work responsibilities. I later learned that, as a result of this private meeting with perhaps five or six very vocal folks who oppose constructing sidewalks on Harvey Street, City Engineering decided to remove the south side sidewalk from the plan and presented this revised plan to the Transportation Committee on October 11th for approval. I was unable to provide comment at the Transportation Commission meeting, again because of work commitments.

The BPW meeting that considered the Harvey Street sidewalks occurred on October 18th (I was unable to attend this meeting because I coach youth hockey and our association held its pre-season evaluations of the 7-8 year olds that evening). As I mentioned, I only have been able to listen to the recording of this meeting very recently because it had not been posted on the city website. What I heard, including statements that were not true, was very disappointing and concerning. I appreciated your skillful chairing of the board meeting and I know that one can evaluate and consider only what is presented at the time. However, two people who spoke during the discussion of the plan to construct sidewalk along Harvey Street misrepresented neighborhood views.

First, my intention is not to impugn the professional integrity of city engineer Steve Sonntag. He seems to be an honest person who got carried away and inadvertently mischaracterized the totality of neighborhood sentiment for new sidewalks on Harvey Street. He may have been excessively influenced by the few people that met with him in person during his field meeting. Nevertheless, Mr. Sonntag said a few things during the BPW meeting that were inaccurate and/or highly exaggerated regarding neighborhood support/opposition to sidewalks on Harvey Street, among them:

“Everyone got upset [about the proposed tree removals]” – This is not correct, a huge exaggeration. It is likely that fewer than ten people were upset that a couple of trees could be removed to construct sidewalk on the street. I assume he was referring to the special meeting he had with sidewalk opponents on October 10th.

“Neighborhood was adamantly against [sidewalk] on both sides.” -- This statement is wildly inaccurate. Having spoken to numerous neighbors about the need for sidewalks on both sides of Harvey Street over the years and heard their passionate support for them; led passage of the SVCA resolution of support of sidewalks in February 2023; attended the PIM; and helped gather 57 signatures in a short time period in support of completing the sidewalk on the south side of Harvey Street (enclosed), I can state unequivocally that a very large number of neighbors west and south of Harvey Street strongly support constructing sidewalks on both sides of the street (and also want sidewalk on the east side Blackhawk). Mr. Sonntag should not have gauged the level of neighborhood support for sidewalks based on the self-selected participation at the field meeting he led; how could he, based on a meeting with fewer than 10 people? Perhaps what he should have stated during the board meeting was akin to, “I don’t have enough information to characterize neighborhood support or opposition for sidewalks on Harvey Street.” This would have been more accurate than what he imparted to the board.

Neighborhood resident Katherine Taylor also spoke during the board meeting. She also stated that the neighborhood opposes sidewalks on Harvey Street; Ms. Taylor only speaks for herself. What she did not say is that she owns and resides at 641 N. Blackhawk Avenue, which is located on the southeast corner of Harvey Street and Blackhawk Avenue (as seen on the right side of the attached photograph; as shown, she prevents the public from accessing the city right of way on the corner with orange tape). She was not forthcoming and transparent about her personal interests. She would be directly affected by constructing sidewalk on the south side of Harvey Street and she should have stated so. I assume that what Ms. Taylor really does not want is the sidewalk to be constructed so close to her house. A closer questioning of Ms. Taylor might have revealed her personal interest in retaining private use of the Harvey Street public right-of-way for buffer/setback space, lawn, and gardens as well as avoiding the requirement to shovel the sidewalk in winter.

I was also very disappointed about what was not said during the board meeting regarding equity, access for all, and safety. No one mentioned the opportunity to improve access to school bus stops or other off-street accommodations for children, the disabled, or others with mobility limitations. How do children who reside on the south side of Harvey Street get to and from the two nearby school bus stops? If school-age children live on the south side of Harvey Street, they will continue to have no choice but to walk in the street to access their bus stops located at the corner of Eugenia Street and South Owen Drive (for Midvale Elementary – kindergarten through 2nd grade) and Blackhawk Avenue and S. Owen (for Lincoln School, 3rd through 5th grades). From an equity perspective, the residents of the south side apartment buildings will still have less safe pedestrian access than others in the neighborhood because the sidewalk in front of the apartment buildings will still not have a direct connection to other streets.

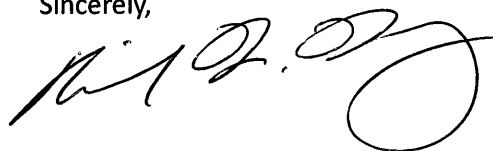
Based on what I heard during the BPW meeting, I have developed a cynical view of what city staff and the public might say and how the members of the board might be swayed from enacting good public policy. The infill sidewalk approval process here was afflicted by selfishness and dishonesty camouflaged by concern for the tree canopy. City staff can exaggerate and be swayed by meeting with opponents of sidewalks while members of the public who might be directly affected by a project have an incentive to be dishonest. Furthermore, the city's interest was not adequately inclined towards safety and access for all.

The time to complete sidewalks on both sides of Harvey Street is now, in 2024, while we have a project ready to go, not in 10 years or more. The sidewalk network in older neighborhoods like Sunset Village will never be completed if city officials allow the sidewalk approval process to be manipulated and stymied by a few loud voices. My goodness, the cities of Milwaukee, Chicago, St. Paul, and Detroit all have more complete sidewalk networks than Madison. Madison will never complete a safe pedestrian network if the city cannot screen out the malarkey and complete the small and easily attainable stuff like Harvey Street. Many city leaders tout Madison as being pedestrian friendly but the city can't even figure out how to build less than 300 feet of simple sidewalk on city right-of-way when the safety, equity, and access benefits are clearly manifest.

As a result of the misrepresentation of facts during the board's October 18, 2023 consideration of constructing sidewalks on Harvey Street, I request that the matter of Harvey Street sidewalks be brought back to the board for discussion, revision, and reconsideration.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Enclosures

Cc: Jim Wolfe, City Engineering
Chris Petykowski, City Engineering
Jonathan Becker, Sunset Village Community Association
Ald. Regina Vidaver
Harald Kliems, Transportation Commission & BPW
Ann Kovich, Transportation Commission