
[After 100 years, Fairmont gets a sidewalk](#)

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LOCKPORT TOWNSHIP — A new sidewalk isn't big news in most parts of Will County.

But in unincorporated Fairmont, a 100-year-old neighborhood nestled between Joliet and Lockport, the community's first sidewalk is something to celebrate.

Township, county and Fairmont School District 89 officials gathered Thursday to see the 1,000-foot sidewalk on the east side of Green Garden Place that runs from the school south into the neighborhood.

Earlier in the crisp morning, a mom pushed a baby stroller while shepherding a group of students to school, while older kids walked or jogged down the concrete path, which debuted Oct. 14.

District 89 Supt. Sonya Whitaker said that when she came to Fairmont four years ago, she couldn't understand why the students were walking on the grass to get to school. Then she figured it out.

"They didn't have access to a sidewalk," she said. "... Usually (as an educator), you're thinking about reading, writing and arithmetic. I was thinking, 'what will it take to get a sidewalk up and running?'"

Then Whitaker met Steve Lazzara, a senior planner at the county land use department, and found out that a sidewalk was in the works.

Lazzara credits the Rev. Richard House, of Shiloh Baptist Church on Oak Avenue, with the idea of planting a sidewalk in the impoverished community, the first of possibly many to come.

House, in turn, said Lazzara was the one who brought the sidewalk plan to fruition.

"Steve worked with us and stayed with it like a pit bull, he wouldn't let go of it," House said. "... He was very determined. He kept pushing and pushing."

The sidewalk is step three of a Fairmont neighborhood improvement effort. Steps one and two were an urban garden at the Fairmont Community Center and a bus shelter along Green Garden Place.

The plan is being spearheaded by the land use department with help from Lockport Township, a planning grant from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning and volunteer efforts. The sidewalk was built with a \$40,000 Safe Routes to School grant from the state.

"It takes all of us to get something done like this," said Curt Paddock, the land use department's director.

There also is a steering committee of neighborhood residents and public officials that's helping to formulate the improvement plan. Will County Board member Denise Winfrey (D-Joliet) serves on the committee and said she knows firsthand about conditions in Fairmont because she worked as the school district's business manager in 1979-80.

"Sitting in the office here on this corner, you could look down the street and see the kids in these ditches here, walking up the street in the snow, the rain and everything because there was no place else for them to be," she said.

Winfrey said there are more plans in the works that should bring Fairmont a long way from the time when there was no running water and the streets weren't paved. She said there will be more community gardens, improvements to the community center, senior housing and some more businesses and markets.

House would like to see "Fairmont" painted on a nearby water tower to give the neighborhood a sense of pride. He also would like to see a wider trash pickup system so residents no longer burn garbage in trash barrels.

And next year the county's Community Development Block Grant funds will be used for flooding control in Fairmont. The work will alleviate both road and property flooding, said Derek O'Sullivan, a land use department subdivision engineer.

The solution may include stormwater swales and ditches or storm sewers. But it could be as simple as teaching people how to grade their yards or manage their gutters to prevent flooding, O'Sullivan said.

But on Thursday, it was all about the sidewalk.

"I've been here 60 years, and this is amazing," said Percy Conway, owner of Conway's Hi-Style Beauty Center and Conway's Barbershop on Illinois 171.

School board member Charles Travis agreed, saying he walked the streets of Fairmont to school many years ago.

"I never would have thought that I would have seen a sidewalk in Fairmont," he said. "And I thank you for what you're doing for these kids because they really need it."

Longtime resident and former county board member Henry Travis said a sidewalk is more than a sidewalk in Fairmont because it shows progress at long last.

"It looks like we're going forward instead of backward," he said.

And while all the adults extolled the safety virtues of the sidewalk, House said the kids are having fun with it.

"I've even saw them skateboarding on the sidewalk," he said. "I've never seen kids skateboarding in Fairmont."