

# Pottstown sidewalk repairs soon may be on the cutting edge

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A carved sidewalk is seen on Chestnut Street in Pottstown. (Photo by John Strickler/The Mercury)

POTTSTOWN — A plan to address buckled sidewalks that Borough Council recently agreed to examine is quite literally on the cutting edge.

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The common rub in Pottstown is that many sidewalks are buckled by tree roots.

And that's true.

But more than half the buckled sidewalks in town got that way for reasons that have nothing to do with trees, according to a recent study.

In either case, the fix is usually the same: pull up the concrete, address the underlying problem, and put down more concrete. But that gets expensive.

Tom Sweitzer, co-founder of **Always Safe Sidewalks**, recently told Borough Council that there are nearly 3,000 trip hazards amid the borough's dilapidated sidewalks that are "not beyond repair." Fixing them all the conventional way would cost about \$890,000.

But there is another method, one that would only cost about \$210,000, and that is to use a special saw to trim the concrete down to the point that the trip hazard is eliminated.

Sweitzer said he began his precision concrete cutting company in 2007 and has done work in Lancaster, York, State College, and the University of Pennsylvania, Drexel and Penn State, and that his crews can address "50 hazards per day."

"Essentially, Pottstown has too much sidewalk, and overall, they're in very poor condition," he said, estimating that "50 percent is beyond any type of repair."

He added that "trees definitely play a role, but they are not, by far, the only reason" for sidewalk problems.

The cuts his crew makes are usually no more than 2 inches, but smooth out bumps enough to not only eliminate tripping hazards, but also to meet federal Americans with Disabilities Act regulations, Sweitzer said.

The procedure also causes no structural damage to the sidewalk, an assertion supported by Doug Yerger, Pottstown's public works director.

The cost to property owners, who are legally liable for the conditions of the sidewalk in front of their property, can be as low as \$50, \$70 for wider sidewalks, Sweitzer said.

"It seems like a very viable, cost-effective solution," council Vice President Jeff Chomnuk told Sweitzer following his presentation.

"It looks like a good idea to me," seconded Councilman Jody Rhoads. "I don't think there's a problem with it."

The idea Rhoads endorsed was brought to Pottstown by former shade tree commission chairman Thomas Hylton. Hylton said he discovered the sidewalks where work had been done completely by accident while walking in places like Franklin and Marshall College, the University of Pennsylvania, Drexel University, and the Morrisville School District.

He received permission from Borough Manager Jason Bobst to try some "demonstration projects" on sidewalks damaged by tree roots using \$7,500 from Trees Inc., the nonprofit organization that does some tree maintenance in Pottstown.

"It's less expense and it's a lot easier than replacing the sidewalk," he told council in introducing Sweitzer.

"I just wanted people to be aware of this alternative," he said.

Council President Stephen Toroney appointed Councilman Mark Gibson, along with Rhoads and Chomnuk, to form a committee to "identify what areas in the borough would be addressed" in a further demonstration project, Bobst wrote in an email to The Mercury.

Toroney "appointed these three Councilors since the majority of the areas identified in Tom's study are in the first, third and sixth Wards. Council seems very supportive of the concept and hopes it can address our sidewalk concerns where applicable," Bobst wrote.

