Taskar Center for Accessible Technology (TCAT) report offers guidance for legislators and transportation agencies on data, quality, availability and the road ahead.
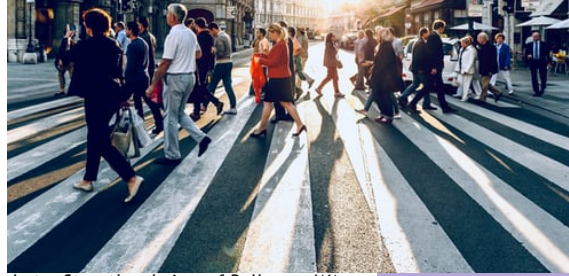
Web: https://viewer.sidewalks.washington.edu

photo: Streetlevel view of Bellevue, WA

FOCUS ON PEDESTRIANS IN WASHINGTON

The Issue

Access to safe and functional sidewalks is essential for sustainable, equitable and inclusive communities. Yet in many parts of Washington, data about the pedestrian environment—such as sidewalk availability, condition, and connectivity—is either incomplete or unavailable. A caregiver with a stroller trying to navigate cracked, narrow sidewalks, a traveler with a wheelchair moving along the shoulder of a busy road because there's no sidewalk at all. Or elderly residents using a walker to reach the bus stop, only to find the path riddled with broken pavement, making each step a hazard. For many Washingtonians, this isn't hypothetical; it's daily life. In countless neighborhoods, sidewalks are either deteriorating or simply don't exist, and people choose against active transportation when they can for lack of knowledge where they would feel and be safe. Planners, too, are feeling the impact of this missing data. King County, for example, has a real need to improve sidewalks around transitional housing facilities but doesn't know where to start. Without a clear picture of sidewalk conditions, they don't know which areas lack basic accessibility or safety features like proper sidewalk width. This gap in information makes it nearly impossible to set concrete project plans or evaluate the environmental and access impacts of new work in these areas.

The Proviso Project

Under the directive of the state legislature and using innovative technology by the University of Washington, Washington is now creating a comprehensive, high-quality pedestrian network dataset that includes detailed sidewalk data across the state. This project supports equitable mobility by equipping state agencies, local governments, and community organizations with data to plan Complete Streets and prioritize resources where they're most needed. The data also allows better support for state safety initiatives, including Vision Zero, and enhances agencies' ability to make data-driven decisions to prevent serious pedestrian injuries. Ensuring this sidewalk dataset is updated and expanded will help Washington provide all residents, especially vulnerable populations, with safe, accessible, and sustainable transportation options.

With this data, transportation planners and community members will have the information they need to address critical accessibility, safety, and equity gaps within the transportation network. In historically overburdened areas, this can mean identifying where crumbling or missing sidewalks are, and improving conditions for residents to safely access work, transit, schools, and other services.

THE PROBLEM

Many neighborhoods and jurisdictions across Washington lack accurate, up-to-date data on sidewalk availability and conditions, leaving gaps in safety and accessibility for pedestrians.

THE WORK

The Taskar Center at the University of Washington and Gaussian Solutions have:

- Mapped sidewalks in areas covering 50% of Washington residents;
- Trained planners and community groups to use and contribute to the dataset;
- Created a plan to expand sidewalk mapping to reach 90% of Washington's population in the next biennium.

IMPLICATIONS

With this data, routing and navigation apps can provide travelers with information on accessible routes, empowering them to choose paths that meet their mobility needs and feel safe using active transportation. Additionally, state and local agencies can prioritize sidewalk improvements, supporting Complete Streets policies and improving safety and access in underserved areas.

THE ROAD AHEAD

If funded, in the next biennium this project will:

- Complete sidewalk maps for 90% of Washingtonians;
- Expand data to include safety features like lighting and crosswalk conditions;
- Develop tools for planners and communities to maintain and update sidewalk data, ensuring it remains a reliable resource;
- Support integration of sidewalk data into statewide navigation and safety applications to keep Washington's transportation network accessible, safe, and inclusive for everyone.

The Work

A Washington state project led by the University of Washington is building the state's first comprehensive sidewalks dataset, which will support local governments in addressing pedestrian access, safety, and equity. Spearheaded by the Taskar Center for Accessible Technology, this effort is designed to give planners, policy makers, and community advocates the data they need to improve pedestrian infrastructure, particularly in historically underserved areas.

The work began by reviewing national best practices in data collection and accessibility standards. Drawing on input from planners and community organizations, the team established a data schema through the OpenSidewalks framework, which identifies sidewalk conditions, access points, and obstacles. This structured approach ensures that sidewalk data is not only thorough but also practical for on-the-ground use in planning and evaluation processes.

To enhance its relevance, the project also included direct collaboration with key stakeholders, including King County Metro, WSDOT, and Disability Rights Washington, to gain insights into their specific sidewalk data needs and challenges. The UW team also worked closely with transit agencies and local governments to ensure the data is accessible and usable in both planning and community contexts, providing targeted guidance on how this data can be employed to improve safety, accessibility, and Complete Streets projects across the state.

Current Biennium Results

Through this first biennium, The Taskar Center Team at the University of Washington, in partnership with Gaussian Solutions, have produced high quality, AI-generated human vetted network-graph inventory of sidewalks across 3,600 square kilometers, covering areas where over 30% of Washingtonians live. By the end of this biennium we expect to complete sidewalks inventories for 80% of the state's population. In collaboration with partner agencies, the project identified that locating and actively engaging with low-income, minority, and transportation-challenged communities is essential for making meaningful equity improvements in sidewalk infrastructure. Agencies consistently reported that a lack of comprehensive data on local roadways and pedestrian facilities—such as sidewalks and crossings—has been a major obstacle in planning and prioritizing projects that serve vulnerable communities.

Implications to Planners

Washington's transportation agencies often struggle with resource constraints when it comes to collecting and updating data on sidewalks, intersections, and ramps, particularly on local roads. With this data, agencies will be able to generate the insights needed to effectively assess and improve pedestrian safety and access.

Implications to Travelers

For travelers, this sidewalk dataset means access to real-time information about safe and accessible routes, especially in areas where sidewalks are in poor condition or non-existent.

Road Ahead: The Next Biennium

The Taskar Center's work emphasized the importance of collaborating with both agencies and affected communities to align project planning with local needs. Key steps include building community profiles to identify areas with sidewalk gaps, promoting inclusive public involvement, and evaluating the impact of transportation investments. If funded, the next biennium will complete the sidewalk inventory for 90% of state residents, helping Washington build a pedestrian infrastructure that prioritizes safety, accessibility, and equity in underserved areas.