Put Los Angeles LAT Back on Its Feet

By DONALD SHOUP

bout 4,600 miles of the 10,000 miles of sidewalks in Los Angeles need repair or replacement. Because the city is short of money for this work, it usually makes only temporary asphalt patches ormore commonly—does nothing at

Broken sidewalks are dangerous for pedestrians and expensive for taxpayers. Los Angeles pays about \$2 million a year to settle trip-andfall lawsuits, but voters turned down a tax measure in 1998 to repair sidewalks. Opponents argued that a citywide tax did not guarantee that the sidewalks in their own neighborhoods would ever be repaired—and they had a point. In a city with 4,600 miles of broken sidewalks, most residents would have to wait years before their taxes repaired the sidewalk on their block.

Fortunately, other California cities have discovered how to pay for sidewalk repairs without increasing taxes. Some cities, such as Santa Monica, require owners to repair the sidewalk fronting their property when they apply for a building permit to improve the property.

Other cities, such as Piedmont, require owners to repair the sidewalk before they sell their property. In the point-of-sale case, owners pay for sidewalk repairs when they cash out their real estate profits, which is often when they are leaving the city.

Beyond improving the sidewalks, this point-of-sale strategy has several advantages. First, owners do not need to do anything until they sell their property, and then the sale provides cash to pay for any repairs. Owners fix only the sidewalk in front of their own property, so they know where their money is going. Good sidewalks help to maintain property values.

The sidewalk repairs are gradual but inevitable because half of all properties are sold at least once every decade. And because the property turnover rate is about the same throughout the city, the sidewalks are repaired everywhere at about the same rate. These repairs

cost the city nothing, so no new taxes are needed. In fact, the city saves money because better sidewalks reduce the number of tripand-fall lawsuits.

The continuous investment in better sidewalks creates a steady demand for local contractors, construction workers, and suppliers. This job creation is crucial when we consider the jobs lost since Sept. 11.

Because about 10% of all properties are sold every year, about 460 miles of sidewalks in Los Angeles would be repaired in the first year of a point-of-sale program. An economic model of Southern California shows that this investment would increase local wages by about \$50 million in the first year.

If other cities in the region also adopted this policy, the economic benefits would be even greater. Sidewalk repair is not a make-work program, but it would create jobs in a time of economic distress.

A recent national study named Los Angeles one of the nation's most dangerous cities for pedestrians and recommended sidewalk improvements as a way to increase safety. Although we voted against a tax to improve our sidewalks, we can adopt the repair-at-sale strategy that already works well in other California cities. Investment in sidewalk repairs would help to put Los Angeles back on its feet.

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