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## Bad sidewalks lead nowhere

■ City does little for repairs; property owners balk at cost



PHOTOS BY ERIN MCCrackEN / COURIER & PRESS

Brent Jackson, president of the Presidents Neighborhood Association, shows a place along Covert Avenue and U.S. 41 where the sidewalk is so narrow a person has to enter the street to get past, making it unsafe for pedestrians. Jackson is advocating a citywide audit of sidewalks in areas of heavy pedestrian use and hoping sidewalks can get repaired for the safety of residents and pedestrians.

**By Thomas B. Langhorne**  
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The city's decision this month to pump \$500,000 in unexpected tax revenue into sidewalks epitomizes Evansville's long-standing catch-as-catch-can approach to pay for its most requested capital improvement.

The money is part of a \$2.9 million windfall from a statewide tax-revenue distribution mishap the city may spend anywhere.

But the cash infusion isn't part of a long-term plan for

sidewalk renewal in Evansville. It is another instance of found money, one of several irregular funding sources that form an imperfect solution to a long-term problem.

City officials say they don't know the cost of addressing the sidewalk problem, but the issues are plain to see. Decades-old sidewalks are in such disrepair they force walkers and wheelchair-using individuals into the street. Well-worn footpaths in grassy areas show where sidewalks are needed, in



A storm drain sits lower than a sidewalk along Covert Avenue, which causes the street to flood when it rains heavily.

See SIDEWALKS, 15A

## Health provider bailouts common

■ Welborn just one of many

**By Jessica Wray**  
Special to the Courier & Press

Evansville's Welborn Health Plans is not the first regional health benefits provider to leave the Indiana and Kentucky insurance markets.

Welborn announced last week it no longer will provide employer group services after Dec. 31 and is endorsing Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield as its carrier of choice for its clients to use in the future.

Evansville employers such as the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corp. and Vanderburgh County government that use Welborn as their primary or only insurance carrier, must search for another provider.

But this isn't the first time in the past five years some Evansville residents have had to switch gears and find a new carrier.

The national company Principal Financial Group left the medical insurance business in 2010. Even though Principal was a leading carrier of medical insurance at the time, it dropped that area of coverage to focus on others such as life insurance, disability, retirement, vision and dental.

Principal made an agreement with United-Healthcare, a national health insurance corporation, to transition and provide coverage for Principal's clients, much like Welborn's agreement with Anthem. One different aspect, though, is Principal phased out of the market

See INSURANCE, 14A

## Breaking meth's addictive grip

■ Former addict clean, forms support group

**By Mark Wilson**  
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By the time he was 17, Donald Storey Jr. was firing methamphetamine, injecting the powerfully addictive drug straight into his bloodstream.

It was a way of life for Storey, now 41, whose struggles with using meth began early and lasted until just nine months ago. Storey said his mother was an alcoholic. Raised by a father struggling with his own addictions, Storey said he was introduced to marijuana, and soon after that methamphetamine, by a former stepmother when he was a teenager. The drug lifestyle became the family lifestyle.

"My dad has helped me shoot up,"

he said.

He recalled the entire family getting arrested when he was 17 or 18, Storey for burglary and the rest of his family for meth. Sentenced to prison, he still recalls riding off to the Indiana Department of Correction handcuffed to his father.

"I have brothers and sisters. They are all in active addiction," he said.

Storey is frank about his life. It's where he came from, but it's not who he is now or where he is going.

"I decided to get clean. I was either going to get clean, or I was going to die. It was that simple," he said. "Getting high wasn't fun anymore."

Though he has been done with using meth for most of a year now, he still feels the health effects of his

decades of use.

"Yesterday, due to my meth use, I went and had four teeth pulled," he said last week while sitting in the parlor of Living Word Fellowship Church on Evansville's South Side.

The church at 1051 Riverside Drive is where Life After Meth, the chapter of Crystal Meth Anonymous (CMA) that Storey founded, meets every week.

"It's not easy. I feel a lot better, and I have put on a lot of weight" Storey said. "I've got a point to prove. I can do this. You have got to want it. You have to really love it."

Looking into recovery options, Storey found CMA's 12-step program seemed to fit his needs, only to discover the closest chapter was in Terre Haute, Ind. Not only was it a long drive, but it wouldn't help him connect with and build on a lo-

See METH, 14A

## Grand juries: Why prosecutors use them

**By Mark Wilson**  
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Faced with the difficult decision of whether to file charges against Vanderburgh County resident Ira Beumer for his fatal vehicular pursuit of men charged with robbing him, the Vanderburgh County Prosecutor's Office turned to the centuries-old legal tradition of a grand jury investigation.

After hearing closed-door testimony directed by the Prosecutor's Office, the six-member panel of citizens, chosen randomly from voter registration and taxpayer roles, indicted

Beumer on charges of murder, attempted murder and aggravated battery.

Prosecutors say the grand jury process is a useful tool in circumstances where the evidence, and how that evidence applies to the law, is unusually complicated.

"I think there is a lot of misconception out there about them," said Vanderburgh County Prosecutor Nick Hermann.

However, as a legal tool the grand jury has come under criticism for being susceptible to the influence of prosecutors and has been the subject

See GRAND JURIES, 14A



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## FROM THE COVER

SIDEWALKS  
from 1A

some cases because variances in building standards allowed developers not to build them. Crumbling sidewalks sit in front of empty lots where houses once stood.

"Wild guess? \$100 million — but that might be light," Brent Jackson said when asked to estimate a cost to fix it all. Several city officials said they lack cost information to second-guess Jackson, president of the Presidents Neighborhood Association on the Southeast Side.

Jackson, whose group conducted a walkability assessment of Ravenswood Boulevard and Covert Avenue near U.S. 41 last year, calls for a citywide audit of existing sidewalks to delineate between what is essential and what is merely desirable.

"Before we go to just arbitrarily replacing sidewalks, we need to discover, 'Where do people walk today?'" he said.

Mayor Lloyd Winnecke and City Engineer Pat Keepees know people want better sidewalks. Each said sidewalk replacement tops the list of requests received by his office.

For Winnecke, an elected official, that is motivation enough. But the city's approach to its sidewalk problem is colored by one overarching reality: Money is in short supply. Another challenge is property owners who aren't interested in sharing the costs.

Property tax revenue, local government's single largest source of money, has been off the table for decades. City officials rely on a patchwork of alternative funding sources — tax revenue from Casino Aztar, federal grants, stimulus funds, Tax Increment Financing districts — to replace sidewalks.

In other instances, such as the current construction at Lincoln Avenue and Green River Road on Evansville's East Side, sidewalk work happens incidentally as part of road or utility repair projects.

Last year, the Evansville Redevelopment Commission ordered installation of new sidewalks along several blocks of Main Street shortly after the opening of the Ford Center. That \$300,000 project was paid for with TIF money.

City officials say they want to be strategic in how they use available money. Philip Hooper, executive director of the Evansville Department of Metropolitan Development, said the Main Street project was done separately from the arena, "but there's obviously a lot of synergy there."

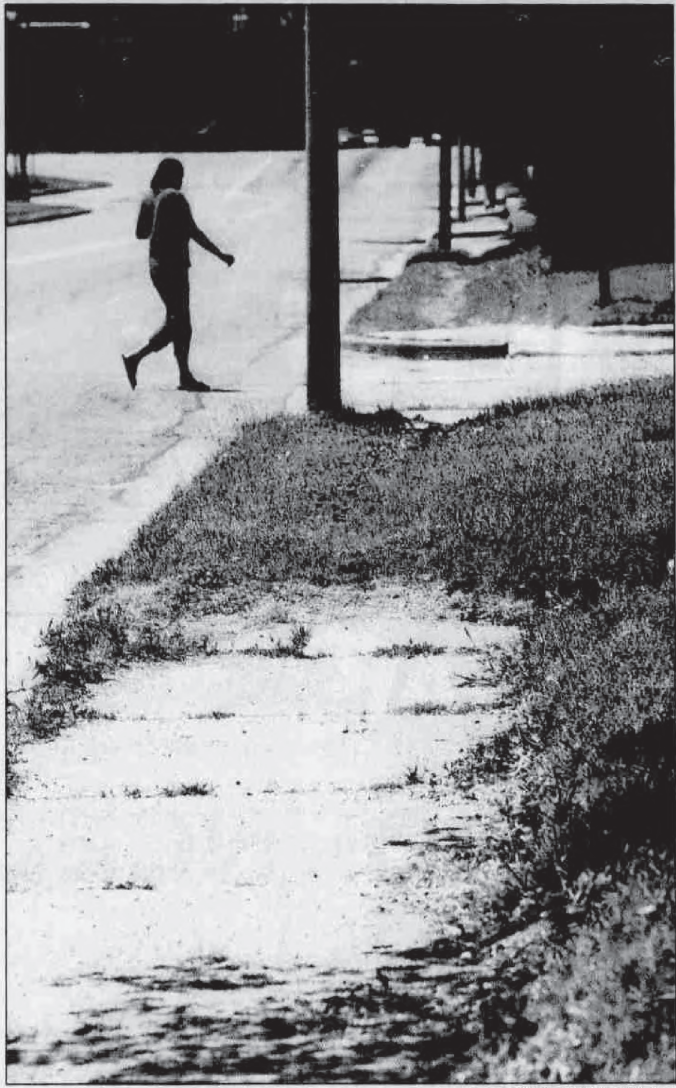
"The businesses deserve to have their infrastructure invested in when they can, and I think Main Street there was at a tipping point with or without the arena, that the sidewalks needed to be brought into the 21st century and updated," Hooper said.

Several sidewalks in and around the city's Haynie's Corner neighborhood, including some adjacent to city-owned lots, were rebuilt in the past year using about \$375,000 in stimulus money. Hooper called it a prioritized project "to stimulate the resurgence of that area."

An additional half-million dollars' worth of work is on the way. For a year the city has held \$500,000 in federal Community Development Block Grant funds for sidewalk improvements in low- to moderate-income neighborhoods, but no actual work was done last year.

Hooper said sidewalk conditions shouldn't be the only factor guiding city officials as they decide where to spend the money. The goal, he said, should be to "maximize how infrastructure is a community economic development tool."

"If we can line that up next to where a community development corporation is doing a housing project or where maybe



PHOTOS BY ERIN MCCracken / COURIER &amp; PRESS

The sidewalks along Covert Avenue east of U.S. Hwy 41 abruptly start and stop for no apparent reason. City officials rely on a patchwork of alternative funding sources to repair and build sidewalks. They say money is in short supply, and property owners generally are not interested in sharing the costs of repair.

there's an infrastructure section that can be done that could help lure a business..." he said. "Maybe there's a building that a company wants to expand in or relocate to, and if they see that commitment, it will help."

## A FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE

It is the city's use of Casino Aztar revenue in a cost-sharing arrangement with homeowners that constitutes its most consistent funded initiative to chip away at the sidewalk problem.

Using private contractors who submit bids, the city replaces sidewalks when property owners request it and pay up to half the costs over periods as long as 10 years. The work ranges from spot repair requested by individual property owners to full block-face replacement initiated by petitions signed by at least half of abutting property owners. Those who don't sign still must help pay for the work, although Keepees said that rarely is an issue.

Within the pool of petition requests — roughly 350 are pending — the city prioritizes based on physical characteristics of sidewalks.

Keepees, city engineer since 1999, says the program has helped the city stretch dollars for sidewalk work.

"Cost-sharing with people who are participating voluntarily gives us an additional stream of revenue and lets us do more than we would have otherwise," said Keepees, who added that "well over 1,000" petitions have been received since the program began in 2005.

The cost-sharing program stemmed from suggestions made by the Sidewalk and Curb Ramp Advisory Task Force, which was created in 2004 to review the city's approach to sidewalk replacement and to explore alternatives. The work of the task force, composed of residents of United Neighborhoods of Evansville member associations, led to adoption of Evansville's current Sidewalk Construction and Financing Policy Ordinance.

And with that, city government's response to Evansville's sidewalk problem fundamentally changed.

"When I was mayor, we just went out and fixed

sidewalks with the city covering 100 percent of the costs," said City Controller Russ Lloyd Jr., who served as Evansville's chief executive from 2000 until 2004. "We didn't ask residents to participate, but dollars weren't as tight maybe in 2002 or 2003 as they are now."

In those days, Lloyd said, the city identified needed sidewalk improvements by listening to neighborhood association leaders, residents and City Council members.

The city still can replace or install sidewalks at its discretion with taxpayers bearing the costs, Keepees said, but that happens only occasionally and only when it serves a large number of residents. Keepees said the cost-sharing program is providing more than enough work to keep contractors busy.

The amount of Casino Aztar money the city has spent on the program ranged from a high of \$880,000 in 2006 to a low of \$160,000 in 2010, but property owners provided up to half of that money depending on when invoices were paid. Property owners paid 25 percent of the costs in the first year of the program.

## THE CRITICS

The cost-sharing program may be working in residential neighborhoods where homeowners feel invested in their properties, critics say, but it still leaves unaddressed many sidewalks abutting poor neighborhoods and rental properties.

Brent Jackson recalls landlords laughing at him when he talked to them about the program.

Plagued by high utility costs and transient renters who sometimes don't pay, landlords tell Jackson that having working air conditioners and fixing roof leaks are more important to them than sidewalk replacement.

"Rental properties don't really have much of an incentive to get involved with the (city's cost-sharing) program, and a lot of properties that have sidewalk problems are rental," he said.

"Once you have a block that's all rental, you can tell within 20 years because the properties look in pieces. I just can't call down to the Evansville city garage and say, 'Hey, this sidewalk's going to be a hazard. Someone's going

to trip on it and break their neck someday.' They'll go, 'OK, you need to get a petition, and go start talking to your neighbors about that then.' It's a hands-off kind of thing for the city."

But the cost-sharing initiative doesn't leave all landlords cold.

Monte Fetter, whose company owns or manages about 400 rental properties in Vanderburgh and Warrick counties, says he often tells other landlords they should participate in the program.

"I jumped all over this program. I had a lot of my buildings, especially in the Downtown area, that we got new sidewalks for," said Fetter, president of the Property Owners and Managers Association of Evansville.

"It adds value to your building. It adds curb appeal when they drive up."

Fetter acknowledged some landlords "have other places for their money to go" besides cost-sharing for sidewalk replacement. What they may not understand, he said, is sidewalk replacement can help them rejuvenate their businesses.

"There is virtually no profit margin in low-income housing and not a lot in middle income," Fetter said. "We're working to try to get rid of some of the costs and charges. It's a reality: If we don't put some profit back in low-income housing, then investors will disappear and government's going to have to figure out how to provide it. We want to get it back to where investors want to invest and have decent buildings again, and can."

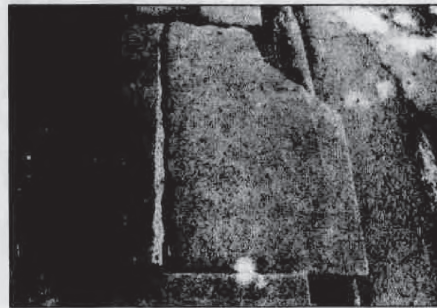
For lower-income property owners, the costs of sidewalk work is very much to the point. Cheryl Musgrave, director of Keep Evansville Beautiful, said even cost-sharing is beyond the means of many people in her Downtown neighborhood.

"The program shuts out the poor," she said. Construction of a new concrete walk five feet wide can cost between \$40 and \$50 a linear foot, according to Keepees. That means replacing the sidewalk on a typical 400-foot long block can cost \$16,000 to \$20,000.

Dissatisfied with the city's explanation that it has plenty of work to do within the cost-sharing program, Jackson said more money must be



New sidewalks were laid in the Presidents neighborhood along Ravenswood Drive as part of a sewer project on the southeast side of Evansville.



A part of the concrete is broken and raised as a result of trees growing along Covert Avenue east of U.S. 41. Evansville has dozens, if not hundreds, of similar sidewalk problems.

## PROBLEMS DOWN THE ROAD

Outside of Evansville, in Vanderburgh County's fast-growing residential areas, a day is coming when officials and property owners will confront the same sort of sidewalk issues now faced in the city.

County Engineer John Stoll said subdivision developers are required by county codes to install sidewalks unless the Vanderburgh County Board of Commissioners waives the requirement — which it often does.

Stoll said the need for sidewalk replacement in the county is not as acute as in the city, given the fact a large chunk of Vanderburgh County's subdivisions have sprung up within the past two

decades.

"We just don't have as many sidewalks as they do, and I'd say in general, they're probably a lot newer in the county than they are in the city," he said. "If you're comparing sidewalks in Downtown Evansville versus a subdivision that's been built in 10 years, obviously we wouldn't have the need to do repair work like the city would."

But as sidewalks in the county get older and deteriorate, Stoll said, "then the county will have that added cost later."

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found for purely need-based sidewalk replacement.

"They're saying they have a cup this big, and it's full," he said, separating his hands by about 12 inches and then by two feet. "I'm saying the cup's this big, and it's not full. They're not measuring the need. They're measuring what their capacity is right now."

## TILTING AT WINDMILLS

Musgrave, a former Vanderburgh County assessor, pointed to a concern that is more philosophical than economic. At most residences in the city, she said, abutting sidewalks do not lie within the homeowner's lot lines. They are instead public property.

By asking property owners to share the costs of sidewalk replacement, Musgrave said the city is abdicating its responsibility to pay for sidewalks it owns and pushing it onto property owners who don't own them.

"The city owns the sidewalk and the street just the same way. It's not a different kind of ownership. They're obligated to maintain the street, and they're obligated to maintain the sidewalk," she said. "It would be the same as if they said, 'We'll pave your road if you pay for half of it.'"

"It sounds like a good deal to a homeowner who might not be aware of where their lot line is because they think they're getting half their sidewalk paid for by the city, and maybe they don't understand that it's truly the city's obligation to pay for the whole thing — in most areas."

But Musgrave acknowledged she has helped pay for sidewalk replacement outside her own home despite the fact the sidewalks fall outside her deeded property.

"OK, that's the only way I'm getting a sidewalk? OK, fine," she recalled. "I wasn't happy then. I'm not happy now."

Musgrave knows she is tilting at windmills with the ownership argument because most people don't want to hear it.

She recalls making

the argument at a United Neighborhoods of Evansville meeting several years ago at which then-DMD Director Tom Barnett extolled the then-new cost-sharing program.

"Everybody was like stars in our eyes, 'Oh, my gosh, we finally get our sidewalks fixed. Shut up, sit down. We'll do anything to get our sidewalks fixed,'" she said with a sigh.

Keepees pointedly noted the people who petition the city for cost-sharing sidewalk work almost certainly are aware sidewalks are public property, yet they ask for help anyway. "They don't have to participate in this program," he said.

## THE MAYOR SPEAKS

Calls to get more sidewalk work done more quickly always come back, as if in a circle game, to one need: more money. Musgrave said the city could issue a bond, saying the idea might be popular even with landlords.

"I think the public would be really excited. I mean, talk about something that's visible, that you walk on everywhere, every day," she said.

But Lloyd said it would cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in fees to lawyers and insurers just to issue a bond large enough to make an impact.

"Maybe you do a sidewalk bond, but then you can't do some other project — maybe, fix Hartke Pool or do a bond issue at the zoo or do something at one of the parks," he said.

The city could devote more of its riverboat money to sidewalks, Lloyd said, but that would mean less money for street paving or new police cars or fire trucks.

Perhaps illustrating how vexing the issue is to policymakers, Mayor Lloyd Winnecke said he has no immediate answers, other than to continue diligently looking for new money.

"I would tell you that, based on what I've been told, \$500,000 takes care of about 1.7 miles of sidewalk," the mayor said. "In terms of just miles of sidewalks, it's a very modest amount. I just don't know."