

## Sidewalk Improvements Underway

By **NANCY BERGERON**

Ruston businessman Joe Henderson remembers when getting to the front door of his financial-services office on South Vienna Street was a treacherous journey.

“The sidewalk was old,” Henderson said. “It had buckled and cracked. People were tripping.”

Now it’s a smooth, safe stroll for his clients and other pedestrians. In fact, Henderson says the work done by the city as part of the Ruston 21 quick response sidewalk improvements program has given his block “new curb appeal.”

Ruston 21 provided new impetus to the city’s on-going program to improve sidewalks throughout the city. Incremental sidewalk upgrades in the core area began in 2009 as a result of citizens’ requests to improve connectivity. Over the last 18 months, the city has improved or built almost 2 miles of sidewalk.

“Sidewalks represent a significant, but worthwhile investment,” Richard Aillet, Ruston’s director of engineering services, said. “It’s an investment in quality of life, and in safety.”

Improved sidewalks also enhance accessibility, aid the flow of pedestrian traffic, provide a link to the Louisiana Tech University campus, and help connect the community, Mayor Dan Hollingsworth said.

“They keep us tied together,” he said. “It adds warmth, a charm, a connection.”

Most of the work done so far has been in the city’s core – areas adjacent to downtown Ruston, and other areas that are high-traffic pedestrian destinations. The long-range plan includes sidewalks adjacent to major thoroughfares such as U.S. 167, as well as in residential and commercial areas.

“Through the future development of Ruston, you’ll have sidewalks constructed as part of that development,” Street Superintendent John Freeman said.

The improvement plan began with a block-by-block inventory of Ruston’s approximately 32 miles of sidewalk. Officials turned to the Louisiana Center for the Blind for help in indentifying areas that were in most urgent need of repair.

“Sidewalks benefit all pedestrians, not just blind pedestrians,” Louisiana Center for Blind Director Pam Allen said. “Since our cane travel instructors spend the majority of their time

teaching and traveling with students in all areas of Ruston, they were eager to share their observations about the need for sidewalk repair and creation in part of the city.”

Officials discovered that while some older areas of the city had sidewalks, many of the walkways were broken, uneven or had been removed, forcing pedestrians to walk on the side of the road.

“Basically, we found that all the sidewalks need some degree of tender loving care,” Freeman said.

The street department has assigned a four-man crew dedicated to sidewalk work. And, when possible, sidewalk work is now included as part of other public works projects.

“It’s all about safe movement of pedestrians, and to tie pedestrian destinations together,” Aillet said.

Allen cites economic and health paybacks, as well.

“The improvements to sidewalks will benefit businesses by generating more pedestrian traffic,” she said. “Walking also promotes better physical health and has environmental benefits.”

The mayor agrees.

“What if the entire town was made up of just streets, no sidewalks, what would it look like?” he asks. “It wouldn’t be very attractive or very pedestrian friendly. Anytime you can provide ease of access, it adds to our community’s overall attractiveness.”

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*Nancy Bergeron is communications manager for the Ruston-Lincoln Chamber of Commerce.*