UNIMPROVED STREETS IN PORTLAND

AN EXPLORATION OF OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES
Roadway Not Improved is a project of LARKE Planning, a group of five Portland State University graduate students in urban and regional planning. Between January and June of 2010, LARKE worked with the Woodstock Neighborhood Association to explore temporary uses and community-based strategies for unimproved streets.

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“Will the City Pay to Maintain or Improve Our Street?

The City of Portland does not currently share in the cost of constructing streets or maintaining substandard streets. Since the beginning of the City’s history, most or all of these costs have been paid for by adjacent property owners. The City receives revenue from the gasoline tax, the weight-mile tax, and vehicle registration fees to fund transportation needs, with the first priority being to use these resources to maintain the $8.1 billion investment its citizens have made in its existing transportation infrastructure instead of building new transportation infrastructure. Property taxes are used for police, fire, parks and other services, but are not being used for transportation infrastructure. Improving all of the City’s dirt and gravel streets would cost at least $300 million.¹

The City’s resources have not kept pace with what is needed to build new transportation infrastructure. Maintaining substandard streets would be especially expensive and is generally ineffective. Maintenance of streets that have not been accepted by the City is the responsibility of abutting property owners. Once a street has been improved to the City’s standard, the City includes the street as part of its transportation system. Then street maintenance is provided using general transportation revenues.”

Portland Bureau of Transportation

¹ PBOT estimates that paving all unimproved streets, including unpaved and substandard streets, to city standard would cost $1.6 billion.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Roadway Not Improved is an exploration of the opportunities and challenges created by unimproved streets in the city of Portland. Conducted by a group of five Portland State University graduate students in urban and regional planning, Roadway Not Improved spanned from January to June 2010.

Terry Griffiths of the Woodstock Neighborhood Association (WNA) served as the client representative, while Matt Wickstrom of the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (BPS) served as the project advisor.

UNIMPROVED STREETS

The term “unimproved street” reflects both the physical quality of a street segment, as well as the party responsible for street maintenance. Unimproved streets typically lack curbs, and have a surface of dirt, gravel, or substandard pavement. The City of Portland has not accepted maintenance responsibility for these streets, leaving adjacent property owners responsible for maintenance and any potential liability issues. City Code requires that streets must be fully improved before being accepted for maintenance.

Property owners adjacent to unimproved streets may conduct basic maintenance without permits, or seek permits for more complex projects. Full improvements are typically completed through Local Improvement Districts (LIDs), or by permit. All options require investment by property owners adjacent to unimproved streets.

CONTEXT

Portland includes 128 lane miles of unimproved roadway, which are a legacy of historic policies, development patterns, and annexation patterns. Their continued existence largely reflects financial constraints.

Current policy reflects the optimistic expectation that streets will be incrementally improved and accepted by the City for maintenance. During the course of this study, it has become apparent that considerable progress towards this goal will not occur in the foreseeable future.

Two barriers to the full improvement of neighborhood streets are the high cost of improvements and the preferences of property owners on unimproved streets. The costs of improvement are often unmanageable for property owners, even when associated with development. Property owners also fear that full improvements will result in increased traffic, changing the character of the street and the neighborhood.
In light of these issues, we must accept that there is no forthcoming “quick fix” that will result in full improvements. Without additional funding sources and comprehensive policy reform, many streets will remain unimproved for some time. The City of Portland has thus far taken a hands-off approach to unimproved streets. For example, city regulations regarding private encroachments into the public right-of-way (ROW) have been enforced inconsistently and typically only in response to complaints. The findings of this study suggest that a more deliberate approach to unimproved streets is needed.

**Survey of Woodstock Residents & Visitors:**
If money were not a concern, would you prefer that ALL streets in the Woodstock Neighborhood were paved with curbs and sidewalks?

- **YES, 20**
- **NO, 39**

**FINDINGS**

- Many unimproved streets are in extremely poor condition.
- Many property owners are unaware of or confused about the types of maintenance that are allowed.
- Property owners lack the tools needed to make good decisions about maintenance.
- Property owners are intimidated by the process of coordinating contractors and materials.
- Many residents feel that city staff members are unresponsive.
- Deteriorating unimproved streets directly conflict with current city policies.
- The City’s laissez-faire approach to unimproved streets encourages unfavorable behavior and reduces awareness of the public interest in these spaces.
In absence of funding and policy changes facilitating the full improvement of unimproved streets, a focus on supporting maintenance and interim improvements is crucial. The City could facilitate maintenance and interim improvements through increased communication, the provision of technical assistance, the provision of resources, and the installation of pilot projects.

In addition, current paths to full improvement do not incorporate any prioritization of improvements. Some unimproved streets are located in proximity to libraries, schools, community centers, and other important services. Others are located next to challenging inclines which prohibit long-term connectivity. However, the improvement process does not reflect an analysis of these factors. Developers and willing property owners drive the improvement process. Development requirements and LIDs lead to an ad-hoc single block approach that fails to prioritize improvements. A systems approach could lead to a more effective transportation network.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Create an information campaign designed to inform and guide property owners adjacent to unimproved streets.
- Provide property owners pursuing interim solutions with the same level of assistance provided to property owners pursuing full improvements.
- Facilitate periodic maintenance of unimproved streets citywide through the procurement of materials and services.
- Pursue pilot projects on unimproved streets, which provide a unique opportunity for innovative practice.
- Partner with neighborhood associations to create neighborhood transportation plans in order to identify and prioritize essential improvements to unimproved streets.
CASE STUDY

Roadway Not Improved included extensive outreach in the Woodstock neighborhood. While 2% of city roadway is unimproved, approximately 8% of roadway in the Woodstock neighborhood is unimproved. The vast majority of public input came from residents adjacent to unimproved streets in Woodstock.

Problem assessment included an investigation of physical conditions, an exploration of resident views, and research about regional goals. An inventory of neighborhood streets revealed a wide range of conditions.

Resident views were solicited through interviews, an online survey, and a public meeting called a Discovery Session. Resident views of these spaces span a wide spectrum, with most participants identifying both positive and negative aspects of unimproved streets.

Residents appreciate the traffic calming effect of these streets, but are concerned about connectivity, safety, and aesthetic value. Regional priorities and goals relevant to transportation infrastructure mirror these concerns.

A survey of international and national trends revealed a movement towards transportation infrastructure that balances vehicle access with other transportation modes, and the role of streets as multi-faceted public spaces.

Our research led us to generate a list of criteria synthesizing the primary issues relevant to the conditions and potential alterations of unimproved streets.

Through a survey of best practices, we identified creative examples of streets that address multiple criteria successfully. These examples informed the development of potential design concepts for unimproved streets.

Design concepts were first presented to a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) composed primarily of City staff members. After revision, design concepts were presented to the Woodstock neighborhood.

PRODUCTS

This Report is designed to provide local decision-makers with an understanding of issues relevant to unimproved streets.

The companion to this Report is the Roadway Not Improved Community Toolkit. The Toolkit is designed to serve as a resource for property owners and residents living adjacent to unimproved streets. The Toolkit informs property owners of their rights and responsibilities under current city policy, provides information about choices, outlines strategies for collaborating with neighbors, and plants the seeds for a neighborhood approach to maintenance and advocacy.

For more information, and electronic versions of both documents, visit roadwaynotimproved.com.
INTRODUCTION

Unimproved streets account for 2% of Portland roadway. The City does not accept maintenance responsibility for these streets.

UNIMPROVED STREETS

In Portland, OR, the term “unimproved street” reflects both the physical quality of a street segment, as well as the party responsible for street maintenance. The vast majority of streets within the city of Portland are fully paved with sidewalks and maintained by the Portland Bureau of Transportation. In contrast, unimproved streets typically lack curbs, and have a surface of dirt, gravel, or substandard pavement. In other cities, these streets are sometimes called “underdeveloped streets” or “unaccepted streets.” Approximately 128 lane miles of Portland streets are unimproved. The City of Portland has not accepted maintenance responsibility for these streets, leaving adjacent property owners responsible for maintenance and any potential liability issues. *Roadway Not Improved* is primarily an investigation of space in the public right-of-way (ROW) on unimproved streets.
ROADWAY NOT IMPROVED

The Roadway Not Improved project began in January 2010, and formally concludes with the production of a Community Toolkit and this Report in June 2010. With the project, we sought to explore the opportunities and challenges presented by unimproved streets in Portland, using the Woodstock neighborhood of southeast Portland as a case study. The vast majority of public input provided during the course of the project came from residents of the Woodstock neighborhood living adjacent to unimproved streets.

LARKE PLANNING

The project team, LARKE Planning, consists of five students at Portland State University (PSU) pursuing the Master of Urban and Regional Planning (MURP). The project was performed in accordance with the requirements of the Planning Workshop course, the capstone of the two-year graduate program. Workshop projects are intended to be projects of professional quality performed for community clients.

PROJECT ORIGIN & COMMUNITY CLIENT

The initial project proposal was generated by Matt Wickstrom of the Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (BPS), as a result of ongoing conversations with members of the Woodstock Neighborhood Association (WNA). Although unimproved streets are a concern citywide, accounting for approximately 2% of Portland roadway, unimproved streets are abundant in the Woodstock neighborhood, accounting for 8% of neighborhood roadway. The WNA served as the client for Roadway Not Improved, represented by Terry Griffiths, the chair of the WNA Land Use Committee. Matt Wickstrom served as the project advisor.
TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Roadway Not Improved required significant collaboration with the project advisor, Matt Wickstrom, and input from numerous city staff members. Several professionals served as members of the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), providing feedback at a collective meeting on April 16th, 2010.

- Kurt Krueger (PBOT)
- Rich Eisenhauer (PBOT)
- David Nassif (PBOT)
- David Elkin (BES)
- Ginny Peckinpaugh (Staff of Mayor Sam Adams)
- Cary Turkon (Staff of Councilor Amanda Fritz)
- Harris Hyman (professional civil engineer)
- Terry Griffiths (Client)
PRODUCTS

Through primary observations, community outreach, research, and conversations with city staff members, we explored the opportunities and challenges presented by unimproved streets. As the project concludes, we are producing two written products: a Toolkit and this Report.

Geared towards residents on unimproved streets, the Toolkit is designed to educate property owners about their rights and responsibilities and to assist them in making good decisions about maintenance by providing information about the following:

- Policy
- Working with Neighbors & Decision-making
- Design Criteria, Menu & Concepts
- Neighborhood Approach & Advocacy Tools
- Resources

However, property owners’ choices are defined by a regulatory framework that is beyond their control. The purpose of this Report is to provide municipal decision-makers with an understanding of issues relevant to unimproved streets by providing information about the following:

- Historical and political context of unimproved streets
- Project outcomes, including findings and recommendations
- Project elements, including public outreach, research, and community products
The city of Portland currently includes 128 lane miles of unimproved streets, the majority of which are classified as neighborhood streets. Unimproved streets are the product of development patterns, annexation patterns, historic policies, current policies, and financial constraints. Although some unimproved streets have been improved through the development process, and to a lesser extent, the Local Improvement District (LID) process, additional unimproved streets have been added to the Portland street system through annexation.

Over time, citizen expectations of streets have expanded. Streets serve as travel corridors for an increasing variety of transportation modes, stormwater management systems, and public spaces. Unfortunately, funding streams for transportation infrastructure have not grown at the same pace as our ambitions. In the current economic climate, it is unlikely that private development will result in extensive street improvements. However, local government agencies and Portland residents have also been affected by financial constraints. These conditions exacerbate long-standing challenges regarding unimproved streets.

HISTORY

Although there is no single reason why so many streets throughout the city remain unimproved, several factors have contributed to the existence of these streets. Within the city of Portland, streets were platted as development occurred and regulations requiring improvements evolved over time. Some unimproved streets reflect policies from the 1940s through the 1960s which did not require sidewalks for all new developments.

Some areas of Portland were developed prior to annexation, and their form continues to reflect rural and suburban development standards. Many streets within the Woodstock neighborhood which were unimproved at the time of annexation during the early 20th century remain
unimproved today. Annexation history also affects the expectations of property owners regarding unimproved streets. In recently annexed areas, improved transportation and sewer infrastructure may be expected in compensation for the payment of city taxes.

POLICIES

Title 17 of the City Code outlines the property owner’s responsibility for maintenance of unimproved streets adjacent to their property up to the center-line of the right-of-way (ROW). The City does not hold any liability or maintenance responsibility for unimproved streets. Property owners are responsible for the maintenance of the adjacent unimproved street but are limited in the way they may use or alter the existing conditions of the right-of-way.

Property owners are not provided with financial assistance in the maintenance or improvement of unimproved streets, except where special funding districts are created. For example, tax-increment financing (TIF) can be used for street improvements, which has led some neighborhoods to advocate for the creation of Urban Renewal Areas (URAs) for the primary purpose of dealing with unimproved streets. Occasionally, public funds have been used for stormwater management facilities installed during the improvement of unimproved streets.

Policies governing unimproved streets in Portland reflect evolving dynamics and values. In the later part of the 20th century, it was common practice to vacate unimproved streets. This process erased the public interest in the right-of-way, fully transferring the property to private property owners. The transfer allowed adjacent property owners to make full use of the right-of-way area, and returned the vacated right-of-way to the tax rolls for the purposes of property tax assessment. However, with a renewed policy emphasis on maintaining strong connectivity throughout Portland, street vacations now rarely occur. The loss of this option forces property owners to navigate policies regulating maintenance and improvement.

The City of Portland has initiated multiple examinations of unimproved streets. In 1989, Cogan Owens Cogan produced the report “Portland Alternative Street Standards Project” in its capacity as a consultant to the City of Portland. The study identified many challenges associated with the options available to property owners for improvement. The report directly influenced revisions to residential street standards in 1991 which incorporated greater flexibility into street standards.

Please help us! On my street we have done so much research on how to pave it and have not got far because of the cost. It is horrible and I hope someone will help us someday...

Woodstock Resident
# Relevant Policies

<table>
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<th>Policy/Plan</th>
<th>Lead Implementation Bureau</th>
<th>Relevance to Unimproved Streets</th>
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<tr>
<td>Title 17: Public Improvements</td>
<td>PBOT</td>
<td>Provides property owners with the authority to conduct maintenance under Expanded Maintenance Options, and outlines a path to full improvement through LIDs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title 29: Property Maintenance</td>
<td>BDS</td>
<td>Includes regulations relevant to the ROW, requiring clear emergency access routes and prohibiting encroachments, in the form of hedges and shrubs, and obstructions, including trash and debris.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance Regulations</td>
<td>BDS</td>
<td>Includes regulations relevant to development review and approval.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portland Pedestrian Design</td>
<td>PBOT</td>
<td>Includes design criteria and practices designed to promote an environment conducive to walking. These guidelines influence requirements for proposed street improvements. The guide also includes suggested improvements appropriate for unimproved streets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual</td>
<td>BES</td>
<td>Includes requirements and policies relevant to stormwater management, as well as information about facility design, operation, and source controls.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stormwater Management Manual</td>
<td>BES</td>
<td>Guides long-range transportation investments in Portland. The TSP includes ranked lists of planned transportation projects. Some identified improvements are located on streets that are currently unimproved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation System Plan (TSP)</td>
<td>PBOT</td>
<td>Designed to increase cycling through the provision of transportation facilities, end-of-trip facilities, pro-cycling policies, and programs. Some planned bike routes include unimproved street segments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portland Bicycle Plan for 2030</td>
<td>PBOT</td>
<td>Designed to increase walking and biking, reduce motor vehicle travel, expand the urban forest canopy, and increase local food production and consumption. Changes to unimproved streets can further or impede these goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate Action Plan (CAP)</td>
<td>BPS</td>
<td>A 3-year process designed to identify strategies for the City of Portland, the Portland Plan will lead to a revised Comprehensive Plan. Documents generated to inform the Portland Plan clearly identify unimproved streets as a challenge and an opportunity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portland Plan (&amp; Comprehensive Plan)</td>
<td>BPS</td>
<td>Designed to make walking and biking to schools fun, easy, safe, and healthy for students and families. Unimproved streets near schools impede the goals of this program.</td>
</tr>
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Property Owner Options for Maintenance & Improvement

- Maintenance
  - Expanded Maintenance Options (no permits)
  - Permitted Intermediate Improvements

- Unimproved Street
- Full Improvement
  - Local Improvement District (LID)
  - Permitted Full Improvement

Maintenance that does not significantly alter the roadway (width, drainage, etc) can be completed by property owners or contractors without a permit. This maintenance does not transfer maintenance responsibility to City.

Maintenance and intermediate improvements that change the roadway require a permit. Permits are issued on a case-by-case basis by PBOT. These changes do not transfer maintenance to the City.

The City can manage the planning and construction of full street improvements through LIDs. A group of property owners shares the cost of improvement. The City provides affordable financing, allowing payment over time. Completed streets are adopted by the City for maintenance.

Less commonly, full improvements can be installed by private contractors with a permit. This option works best when improvements are part of another construction project (property development), or when a property owner has experience planning construction projects.

These projects may be faster than LID projects, with cheaper labor costs. However, private financing is likely to be more expensive. Completed streets are adopted by the City for maintenance.
In 2000, an extensive study of the LID process resulted in the report, “Improving Portland’s Local Infrastructure: Recommendations for the Local Improvement District Process.” Since its adoption by City Council, several recommendations have been implemented. For example, the administration of LIDs has largely been consolidated under a single point of contact at the Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT).

Although the study focused on the LID process, it acknowledged that financial considerations limit the improvement of streets through this mechanism. As a result, the study directly addressed the maintenance of unimproved streets. In 2003, the Expanded Maintenance Options ordinance gave property owners more flexibility in maintaining unimproved streets.

Despite repeated efforts to formulate and implement improvements to the options available to property owners on unimproved streets, long-standing problems persist. Streets remain in poor condition, conflicting with neighborhood and city goals. Property owners remain confused and frustrated by their options, resulting in a lack of action, or even undesirable action in some cases.
Sharing the Cost

Some other cities with unimproved streets have developed strategies for reducing the burden on adjacent property owners.

In Spokane, WA, a citywide bond funds 1/3 of LID projects on unimproved streets. Where no homes face the unpaved street, public funds cover 1/2 of the project cost. An “Unpaved Road Cost Sharing Fund” provides additional subsidy to low income families.

www.spokaneengineering.org/LocalImprovementDistricts.html

In Seattle, WA, Neighborhood Projects Funds (NPF) pay for community-proposed improvements to streets and parks. Neighborhood district coordinators (similar to liasons), help prioritize the projects.

www.cityofseattle.net/neighborhoods/btgnsfcrf/

In contrast, the City of Ashland, OR, accepts maintenance responsibility for all streets within the city limits, including unimproved streets. Unpaved streets accounts for 10% of Ashland roadway.

www.ashland.or.us/Page.asp?NavID=11743

The varied and occasionally conflicting missions of city bureaus further complicate options for unimproved streets. Several bureaus have particular infrastructure needs which must be met within the limited space of the right-of-way. For a single project, PBOT may advocate for space for bicycle travel and parking, while the Bureau of Environmental Services (BES) may advocate for extensive stormwater improvements. These legitimate needs place additional burdens on property owners exploring improvement options. Conflicting bureau priorities also contribute to communication challenges, as no single point of contact can accurately communicate the full range of facilities that may be required of right-of-way improvements. However, there is a deliberate effort to increase inter-bureau communication and collaboration through special projects, such as “green streets” and “neighborhood greenways.”

The codes, policies, guides, and long-range planning efforts that affect the use of unimproved streets are numerous. Most recently, the Portland Plan Background Reports, created to inform the comprehensive plan review, refer to the need to include unimproved streets in infrastructure planning, as well as the opportunity these streets provide to explore innovative uses of ROW space beyond traditional transportation functions.
Current policy reflects the optimistic expectation that streets will be incrementally improved and adopted by the City of Portland for maintenance. During the course of this study, it has become apparent that the use of half-street construction requirements for new developments and voluntary Local Improvement Districts (LIDs) will not lead to considerable progress in the foreseeable future. Although a full analysis of the primary paths to improvement (development requirements and LIDs) is beyond the scope of this study, a few facts seem apparent.

- Full improvements are expensive. Full improvements are expensive because of the important functions that must be incorporated in streets, including stormwater management. Requirements such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) further increase costs. Improvements are also expensive because unique physical conditions characterize many remaining unimproved streets, increasing engineering costs. Many easier projects, the “low hanging fruit,” have already been targeted for improvement, leaving challenging projects for future consideration.

- The costs of full improvements are out of scale with the type of development that occurs in established neighborhoods and beyond the financial means of residential property owners. Developers and property owners do not believe that these costs can be recovered in future property sales. The Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT) has issued waivers to developers in lieu of requiring half-street improvements. These exceptions suggest that PBOT is aware of the financial challenges of these requirements and that piece-meal improvements are not always highly valued. Many recently completed LID projects included funding from other sources, including stormwater management funding from the Bureau of Environmental Services (BES).

It is unlikely that streets will be improved in the near future. Without maintenance, unimproved streets will impede city goals.
We spent a lot of time organizing our neighbors to bring something to the city. Once we saw the estimate, we realized it is too expensive to bring streets up to code but something should be done.

Woodstock Resident

One of the benefits of Woodstock is that our children are safer on unpaved streets due to less traffic + slower moving vehicles.

Woodstock Resident

- Property owners who become discouraged by the LID process communicate negative impressions to other property owners. Many property owners on unimproved streets have not contacted PBOT regarding improvement options, but have heard second-hand reports of extremely high cost estimates.

- Property owners who complete the LID process communicate negative impressions to other property owners regarding consequences of full improvement. Many property owners on unimproved streets have heard second-hand reports of increased traffic on improved streets. Particularly in neighborhoods with a high density of unimproved streets, newly improved streets stand to gain a disproportionate amount of through traffic.

- Many residents do not want fully improved streets. In the Woodstock neighborhood, many residents perceive underdeveloped streets to be a core component of the character of the neighborhood. Conflicting views of unimproved streets complicate efforts to improve streets through LIDs. Residents who have explored the LID process have reported disappointment with the potential design options proposed by city employees.

Survey of Woodstock Residents & Visitors:

If money were not a concern, would you prefer that ALL streets in the Woodstock Neighborhood were paved with curbs and sidewalks?

- YES, 20
- NO, 39
FINDINGS

In light of these issues, we must accept that there is no forthcoming “quick fix” that will result in full improvements. Without additional funding sources and comprehensive policy reform, many streets will remain unimproved for some time. The City of Portland has thus far taken a hands-off approach to unimproved streets. For example, city regulations regarding private encroachments into the public right-of-way have been enforced inconsistently and typically only in response to complaints. The findings of this study suggest that a more deliberate approach to unimproved streets is needed.

Many unimproved streets are in extremely poor condition.

Potholes, furrows, pooling water, and overgrown vegetation are present on many unimproved streets. Poor conditions inhibit vehicle travel, as well as bicycle and pedestrian travel. Residents operating wheelchairs and strollers face significant obstacles in navigating unimproved streets. In the Woodstock neighborhood, the high density of unimproved streets further contributes to connectivity issues. The continued degradation of streets will increase the difficulty and cost of future improvements by property owners or government entities.
Many property owners are unaware of or confused about the types of maintenance that are allowed.

Despite the establishment of Expanded Maintenance Options, many property owners are not aware of the types of maintenance that are allowed. In the Woodstock neighborhood, even some property owners who explored the LID process, but chose not to pursue it, were not aware of any alternative options for maintenance. In addition, property owners fear that maintenance of unimproved streets will increase obligations and liability.

Property owners lack the tools needed to make good decisions about maintenance.

When choosing to conduct maintenance or install interim street improvements, property owners do not have easy access to information about potential changes to their street. Planned changes to utility or transportation infrastructure could potentially influence how property owners invest in these spaces, if the information were readily available. Although some information is available on PortlandMaps.com, other information is only available through direct inquiry from several different sources, including city bureaus and utility providers. Property owners who do not pursue these contacts operate in an informational void, or forgo maintenance altogether.

In addition, property owners are not educated about the role their street plays in a connected transportation system and what types of maintenance are most appropriate in their location. When neighboring property owners hold conflicting opinions about the need for maintenance and improvements on their street, they have no framework for evaluating choices and making collective decisions.
Property owners are intimidated by the process of coordinating contractors and materials.

Property owners find it difficult to assemble the resources required for maintenance. They are unsure of the services and materials appropriate for maintenance or how to obtain them. The need to reach agreement with neighbors further complicates the process.

Many residents feel that city staff members are unresponsive.

Some property owners contact city staff members when seeking information about maintenance and improvement options. In the Woodstock neighborhood, some property owners have expressed dissatisfaction with the responsiveness of city to their inquiries. They indicate that they must take all of the initiative and even harass staff members in order to receive guidance. They often feel ignored by the City. Without guidance, property owners feel ill-equipped to make decisions about maintenance and improvements.

Deteriorating unimproved streets directly conflict with current city policies.

There is a significant body of existing policy which addresses infrastructure maintenance, stormwater treatment, and accessibility for all transportation modes. The existence of completely unmaintained streets is in conflict with the implementation of several existing policies.

The City’s laissez-faire approach to unimproved streets encourages unfavorable behavior and reduces awareness of the public interest in these spaces.

The City provides little guidance regarding the use of unimproved streets and limited enforcement of regulations. In this vacuum, some property owners have ceased to consider the public interest in the right-of-way. Private uses have extended into the street. Such encroachments are not limited to temporary uses, such as gardens, but include fences and permanent structures. In some cases, vegetation is used deliberately to impede access to the right-of-way.

The City clearly views these spaces as assets potentially necessary for future infrastructure needs, as indicated by the reduced use of street vacations. However, limited participation in their current maintenance and use will make it more challenging to plan for these streets in the future. Should the City exercise its property interests at a later date, it will face confusion and resistance from property owners who have grown accustomed to full control of these spaces. Future proposals will face additional, and perhaps unnecessary, challenges in obtaining community support because of conflicting expectations.
CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

The challenges inherent in the paths to full improvement create a need for guidance about maintenance and interim solutions. However, there are additional reasons to embrace interim strategies. Unimproved streets generate savings for the City of Portland. The maintenance of improved streets is a challenge for the City. The proportion of paved streets in poor condition has increased over time, and is predicted to continue to increase.

The continued existence of unimproved streets reduces maintenance costs. Street cleaning is not conducted on unimproved streets, and adjacent property owners are not eligible to request services such as street lighting. These avoided costs provide an additional motivation to facilitate the maintenance of unimproved streets and a potential argument for modest public investments in these spaces.

In addition, the paths to full improvement do not incorporate any prioritization of improvements. Some unimproved streets are located in proximity to libraries, schools, community centers, and other important services. Others are located next to challenging inclines which prohibit long-term connectivity. However, the improvement process does not reflect an analysis of these factors. Developers and willing property owners drive the improvement process. Development requirements and LIDs lead to an ad-hoc, single block approach that fails to prioritize improvements. A systems approach could lead to a more effective transportation network.
There are a number of changes that would facilitate the path to full improvement. Changes to the LID process could potentially increase the number of streets adopted by the City of Portland for maintenance.

- Provide public funding for a portion of full street improvements in established neighborhoods where development potential is limited or where physical conditions increase construction costs. This may be especially appropriate where improved streets would significantly increase connectivity or access to important services. Barriers to this change are self-evident.
- Expand the design alternatives for LIDs to include bike and pedestrian paths, community gardens, and public plazas if they contribute to established city goals.
- Ensure that a range of design alternatives are communicated to residents considering an LID, rather than focusing on a design that is financially out of reach.

Many residents are strongly motivated to pursue street improvements leading to the permanent transfer of maintenance responsibility. In the Woodstock neighborhood, some residents who previously explored and abandoned the LID process reported an interest in revisiting the option if the aforementioned changes were made.

The reports “Portland Alternative Street Standards Project” and “Improving Portland’s Local Infrastructure: Recommendation for the Local Improvement District Process” include additional suggestions for policy reform. Although some policies have changed since the publications of these reports in 1989 and 2000, respectively, many of the findings and recommendations included in these documents continue to be relevant.
Provide property owners pursuing interim solutions with the same level of assistance provided to property owners pursuing full improvements.

The Local Improvement District (LID) process is the most common route used by property owners to fully improve streets, permanently transferring maintenance responsibility and liability to the City. Through the LID process, the City provides groups of property owners with assistance in planning improvements, making a shared decision, and financing the costs of the improvements. The City devotes considerable staff time to preliminary discussions with property owners regarding the LID process. Finally, the City manages the physical construction of the improvements.

Property owners not seeking full improvements are also in desperate need of these services, which could improve the quality and durability of maintenance and improvement efforts. With technical assistance, property owners might feel empowered to install ambitious interim solutions. For example, where streets are currently impassable, property owners could install a paved path for cyclists and pedestrians, creating new routes for alternative forms of transportation. By establishing relationships with property owners along unimproved streets, the City could advocate for better outcomes, even if maintenance responsibility is not to be transferred.

As a first step to providing such services, city staff members must be instructed to provide property owners with basic information about all maintenance and improvement options. Each option should be explicitly assigned to a staff member prepared to provide more detailed information.

Facilitate periodic maintenance of unimproved streets citywide through the procurement of materials and services.

The City of Portland has access to materials and services central to the maintenance of unimproved streets. The City could arrange for rotating grading services for Portland neighborhoods, as well as the delivery of gravel for a fee. The provision of these resources through an organized program would relieve property owners of the need to arrange for private contractors and the procurement of supplies. Moreover, the economies of scale generated by a large-scale effort would result in lower costs for property owners.

Such involvement may generate concerns about an increase in the liability of the City. As an alternative, grant funding could be provided to neighborhood coalitions, who could conduct periodic maintenance using city resources or private contractors. There may also be a concern that periodic maintenance may create expectations of city maintenance and confusion about responsibilities. However, there could hardly be more confusion about rights and responsibilities regarding unimproved streets than currently exists.

The City must balance the risk of greater expectations and the value of maintenance likely to result from the provision of resources. The implementation of city sponsored maintenance could reduce the compaction of roadway surfaces, which inhibits stormwater infiltration and leads to impassable road conditions. Such maintenance could also reduce the future costs of full improvements.
Partner with neighborhood associations to create neighborhood transportation plans in order to identify and prioritize essential improvements to unimproved streets.

Currently, maintenance and intermediate improvements are driven and carried out by private property owners. A neighborhood plan may help guide these efforts by providing property owners with a broader perspective of how these streets interact with larger circulation needs.

The documentation of neighborhood challenges and opportunities through a group process may also result in cohesive, neighborhood-scale efforts to improve conditions. In the short-term, these efforts may take the form of neighborhood clean-ups and work days targeting unimproved streets. In the long-term, they may lead to a greater willingness of residents to financially contribute to the improvement of neighborhood assets through halo LIDs, or neighborhood improvement districts.

Pursue pilot projects on unimproved streets, which provide a unique opportunity for innovative practice.

The City of Portland has developed a reputation for innovative approaches to transportation challenges. Through technical assistance and the provision of grant funding, Metro contributes to these efforts. Green streets, bicycle boulevards, and neighborhood greenways represent attempts to respond to changing conditions and priorities through creative infrastructure solutions.

Because unimproved streets contain little or no infrastructure catering to motor vehicles, they provide a unique opportunity for pilot projects that provide for multi-modal travel, environmental restoration, and community resources. Such projects may take the form of corridors devoted to bicycle and pedestrian travel, stormwater facilities, or community gardens. There may be greater community support for such projects on unimproved streets, where change does not result in the loss of existing transportation infrastructure, residents value limited auto traffic, and responsibility for improvements would otherwise fall to adjacent property owners.

Public rights-of-way account for the largest proportion of public space in the city of Portland. As such, they are often a key area of focus in responding to the challenges the City faces. In light of forecasts regarding the availability of fuel sources and climate change, we are likely to need new strategies. Unimproved streets can serve as a valuable laboratory for creative solutions to forthcoming problems.