

Handicapped Disabled ✓ Danger for the disabled

Downtown reconstruction creates 'obstacle course'

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SANTA CRUZ — People with disabilities say reconstruction on Pacific Avenue has created a virtual obstacle course complete with sand pits, dangerous drop offs and a confusing maze of paths.

"It's pretty hairy," said Margaret Keith, the executive director of Community Resources for the Disabled. "The downtown situation has prompted a lot of calls and questions to us from people with all types of disabilities."

A walk through downtown with Ed Kramer, who is blind, is a frightening journey.

The corners of the plywood sidewalks curl up into toe stubbing hazards, or end abruptly in back-wrenching drop offs. Neon orange spray painted signs are completely missed, and swinging pieces of fence loom threateningly in his path.

The roar of construction obscures any warning of oncoming traffic, as he moves off a blocked sidewalk and into the path of a large truck.

"There's no way in God's given world I'm going to notice these with my cane," he says, after discovering a bunch of pipes protruding from the back of a truck just

inches from the side of his head. "Sometimes I get (mad) as a wet hen."

Kramer, who says he sees the world "as if I was looking through two sheets of waxed paper," makes his hazardous trek through downtown almost daily.

He is surprisingly surefooted on the surrounding streets, where he can point out any minor crack, loose section, low tree branch or untrimmed bush. But on the Pacific Avenue, where construction crews change the terrain almost daily, he trips, stumbles, and heads down dead-end walkways.

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Ed Kramer, who is blind, negotiates way down Pacific Avenue.

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"I'm a creature of habit due to my vision problems, but the standard paths I normally take are all messed up now," he said. "I'm not able to travel on my familiar paths."

Brad Neily, the regional director of the California Association of Persons with Handicaps, worked with Vision Santa Cruz in developing plans for downtown after it was devastated in the 1989 earthquake.

He says that although the area may be a mess now, it will better than ever when the work is complete.

"Sure the streets are being torn up and it's an inconvenience for everyone to get around, but I'm really excited about what is coming," he said.

Neily, who has limited vision, said perhaps the most unusual feature will be intersections, where the roadway will come up to meet sidewalks eliminating the need for ramps and curb cuts. In addition, plans call for wider and smoother sidewalks, and accessible facilities such as public restrooms and drinking fountains.

Bruce Gabriel, who uses both an electric and a manual wheelchair, says he is also stymied. He said he has been trapped in loose sand between the plywood walkways, and is forced to travel blocks out of his way in search of sidewalk ramps.

"It has been a mess," he said. "I'm living with it because I hope it's going to get better."

Gabriel said he fares better moving through the area in his electric chair, which is "is kind of a tractor" and plows through the loose areas.

"I was cruising through there one day and a guy in a chair said to me, 'It's tough, isn't it?' and I said, 'You're right,'" Gabriel said.

Santa Cruz Accessibility Committee Chairwoman Meadow Fitzgerald says smoke, dust and noise "are making it difficult for everyone."

Fitzgerald, who suffers from environmental illness, said she tries to avoid the area because "most of what they're doing is letting off tons of toxic chemicals."

She noted that the constant noise makes it tricky for hearing impaired people to discern any useful sounds, while blind people are further confused without auditory clues. The area has also become very precarious for people who have difficulty walking or use crutches.

Fitzgerald says she can tolerate the inconvenience if the end result not only complies with the American with Disabilities Act, but also is accessible in all ways.

"My main concern is (if) when we're done the city will really be in compliance with the letter of the law and the spirit of the law," she said.

Construction Manager Mike Egge, who is overseeing the entire Pacific Avenue project, said he had not heard about the problems and that he will make sure the loose gravel is packed down.

Egge said he has made sure access for disabled people is maintained by keeping walkways six feet wide, so wheelchairs and pedestrians can safely pass each other, and by keeping the slope of the paths from becoming too steep.

He said that while he has made it a priority from the onset of the project to maintain accessibility for people in wheelchairs, he may have slipped up in his efforts to accommodate people with other disabilities.

"I may have been remiss because I have not thought about blind access," he said, "and I suppose changing the crossings is a bit confusing for everyone but is making things especially difficult for the mentally handicapped."

"I would invite anyone who is concerned to contact me directly," Egge said. His telephone number is 457-1563.