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### Statewide

# Wheelchair user maps Ellsworth sidewalks

By [Eric Russell](#)  
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Tom Stipe of Ellsworth takes to the travel lane of Route Willow street in Ellsworth to avoid navigating some of the hazardous sidewalks between his Oak Street home and Street church. BANGOR DAILY NEWS/KEVIN BENNET

Tom Stipe didn't pay much attention to the sidewalks of Ellsworth until about 16 years ago when a fire accident landed him in a wheelchair.

Since then, sidewalks have become a big part of Stipe's life.

"When you are an able-bodied person and you walk down the street and come to a curb, it's just a curb," said in an interview this week. "But in a wheelchair, a 5-inch curb might as well be a brick wall."

Since his accident in 1990, Stipe has become a routine traveler of the streets of Ellsworth, from his home on Oak Street to the many side streets throughout downtown.

He knows the city's sidewalks as well as he knows the controls of his motorized wheelchair, and now he shares that knowledge.

Stipe recently created an online map of the city's sidewalks in an effort to help other wheelchair users. He said that it

Stipe recently created an online map of the city's sidewalks, in part as a tool for himself, he said, but also that city officials and the public would take notice.

"I knew it could be done, but when it was done, everyone was so impressed," Stipe said of his map. "I wasn't as impressed as everyone else."

The map has generated a lot of discussion among Ellsworth officials and helped land Stipe on a new local pedestrian planning committee, which meets for the first time this week.

"Certainly, Tom's knowledge of the city's sidewalks is of great value," said Jim Fisher with the Hancock Planning Commission, who is the committee's consultant. "He's put a lot of time and effort into creating it and it's very personal to him."

Ellsworth Deputy Planner Jef Fitzgerald said Stipe's online map should help draw attention to an area of planning that's often overlooked.

"I know [sidewalks] are something that are in the comprehensive plan, but I'm not sure many people are paying attention," he said.

In truth, Stipe himself might not have paid attention — until the accident.

On a rainy evening in the summer of 1990, Stipe was riding his bicycle home from work. The roads were wet and his brakes not as tight as they should have been when he approached a bend in the road on Grand Street in Ellsworth and tried to slow down.

"When I hit the brakes, they were of no use at all," Stipe said, recalling the accident. "I was headed into a sharp curve so I had no idea what was coming. I hit a soft shoulder and the bike stopped dead, but I kept going straight ahead."

Stipe fell against a rock ledge near the dam of the Union River and Leonard Lake. He was paralyzed from the waist down. He would never walk, much less bike, again.

A longtime Ellsworth resident who lives on his own in a house on Oak Street, Stipe became involved with the Union River Healthy Communities coalition a few years ago. An avid user of city sidewalks, he volunteered to create a map.

"I would take my little digital camera out and just travel around taking pictures of where the problems are," Stipe said. "In our car-centered culture, sidewalks are kind of an afterthought."

Much has changed over the years since Stipe has been patrolling the streets of Ellsworth in his wheelchair. Grand Street, the city's busiest roadway, now has sidewalks on both sides.

"The whole consciousness of people with disabilities has evolved. I think people are trying to make things more accessible," Stipe said.

Still, he knows danger is out there.

In 2000, Stipe was hit by a car while trying to cross Route 1 near Rite Aid in his wheelchair. The impact broke both of his legs.

For all of his misfortune on the streets of Ellsworth, Stipe still travels the city sidewalks, although this time

For all of his importance on the streets of Ellsworth, Stipe said, it's not always easy to see that, especially in cities that haven't been designed for the weather doesn't allow it as much as he would like.

"When the snow hits, I'm kind of stuck inside," he said. "Ice is not exactly ideal."

Stipe hopes his online map fosters awareness as development continues to dominate the fast-growing Ellsworth.

Fitzgerald said he already has seen subtle changes.

"I think people are more aware than they used to be. It's obvious that things have been neglected in the said. "It's not always easy to see that, especially in cities that haven't been designed for the transportation."

"Of course, it would be nice if the city had more [sidewalks]," Stipe said. "But a lot of the side streets busy. It's really only the main roads that are of concern."

"Ironically, the part of town that is the worst is [Oak Street], the street I live on."

*Tom Stipe's map*

*of the sidewalks of Ellsworth can be viewed at [www.geocities.com/thomasstipe/index.html](http://www.geocities.com/thomasstipe/index.html).*

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