

Amazing Embrace: Hymns for a New Sidewalk

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It's not often that a sidewalk gets a party in its honor, but some Colesville area residents said their new strip of concrete 10 years in the making deserved a celebration.

More than 100 residents and pedestrian safety advocates gathered recently for pizza, hymn-singing and a cake-cutting by Montgomery County Executive [Isiah Leggett](#) (D) to commemorate a 3,300-foot sidewalk completed last month along Cape May and Good Hope roads, near the [Prince George's County](#) line.



Eric Joseph Quarles, 7, gets a piece of cake from Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett at the party for the sidewalk last month. (By Kevin Clark -- The Washington Post)

The celebration, which participants said had the feel of a joyous tent revival, culminated an effort by a coalition of residents and 30 [Montgomery County](#) congregations.

Cape May and Good Hope are narrow, two-lane roads where residents say walkers often had to trudge through mud and snow while those in wheelchairs or pushing strollers were sometimes forced into the street.

"I was overwhelmed by how much this meant to folks out there," said Jeff Dunckel, the county's pedestrian safety coordinator, who helped oversee the project and attended the Oct. 25 party at Good Hope Union [United Methodist Church](#). "I've never been to a

gathering where people were singing religious songs for a sidewalk. It was pretty touching."



Nonso Nzegwu offers words of praise for the new sidewalk last month at a party at Good Hope Union United Methodist Church in the Colesville area. The party included pizza, cake and singing. (Kevin Clark - The Washington Post)



The 3,300-foot sidewalk runs along Cape May and Good Hope roads in the Colesville area. (Photos By Kevin Clark -- The Washington Post)

Residents said they have been pushing for a sidewalk for at least a decade because Cape May and Good Hope roads connect their neighborhoods to the stores and bus stops along New Hampshire Avenue. The area has a high number of pedestrians and bus riders because many residents in lower- and moderate-income housing cannot afford vehicles, sidewalk activists said. The dangers for pedestrians grew along with traffic volumes as open land around the once-rural roads was developed over the past 30 years, they said.

The Rev. Richard Kukowski, who retired in 2006 after 27 years as rector of the nearby Transfiguration Episcopal Church, said he would regularly offer rides to walkers, particularly people lugging groceries or women pushing strollers.

"Their option was to walk in the mud and grass or in the road," Kukowski said.

The Good Hope community has grown up over the past 40 or so years in a once-rural area that was home to one of the early black settlements in Montgomery. The neighborhood includes Great Hope Homes, a 104-unit townhouse development built in the 1970s as affordable housing. The Montgomery Housing Partnership bought the townhouses in 2000 and continues to rent them at below-market rates.

Calls for a sidewalk went unanswered for years, local activists said, because the roads are in Upper Paint Branch Special Protection Area, an environmentally sensitive expanse governed by strict regulations about how much land surface can be covered with asphalt

or concrete. What seemed like a simple sidewalk project required public hearings, a tree survey and special permits, activists said.

Kukowski said residents weren't well organized behind the idea until Action in Montgomery, a coalition of 30 congregations that works on social justice issues, got involved two years ago.

Cynthia Marshall, an Action in Montgomery organizer, said pedestrian safety was a top concern among the organization's churches. The group organized 50 to 60 people to testify at county hearings and found volunteers who went door-to-door gathering 500 signatures from residents supporting a sidewalk.

"I think what really worked was the congregations and those neighborhoods coming together," Marshall said. "We could go in and say, 'How can we get this built now?'"

County officials said the sidewalk took less than a month to build and cost \$306,000. Its porous concrete will allow rainwater to seep through it and into the ground, where contaminants can be filtered out before the water reaches streams, said Esther Bowring, a county spokeswoman. Each year, the county receives 50 to 60 sidewalk requests and builds about five miles of new walkways.

Nonso Nzegwu, 24, who joined the cause, now owns a car but said he used to walk that stretch of road daily. He said he was once almost hit by a vehicle's side mirror.

"It's just a sidewalk," said Nzegwu, a student at [Howard University](#), "but we know how much impact it makes in the lives of people who use it daily."

Nzegwu and others said they hope the community activism will spur further improvements, such as better street lighting. The Rev. Meg Ingalls, rector of Transfiguration Episcopal Church, said people are "ecstatic" over the positive changes.

"It just shows that when a community comes together and attempts to do something in a unified way," Ingalls said, "the government will listen."