



## **Berms removed from McKeldin Square for pedestrians**

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August 28, 2010

**The problem:** Why were the trees removed from McKeldin Square?

**The backstory:** Given this summer's brutal temperatures, any scrap of shade seemed precious. That's why Washington Hill resident Joanne Stato contacted The Baltimore Sun to ask about the disappearing berms at McKeldin Square.

A reader wrote to Watchdog to ask about the disappearing berms at the plaza, named after former Baltimore mayor and Maryland Gov. Theodore R. McKeldin.

Stato bikes to work near the stadiums and noted that the shade trees in this area had been removed and that construction was continuing. "You pedal through a place every day, and you sort of wonder what the heck is going on," she said.

Mike Evitts, spokesman for the Downtown Partnership, said that the changes were all part of the Pratt Street redevelopment plan designed to make the area more pedestrian-friendly.

When Pratt Street was originally conceived, long before the development of Harborplace, it was intended to connect cars from Interstate 95 to Interstate-83 — "basically a highway connector at grade level," he said.

"Modern downtown was designed at a time when people drove in to where they work," he said. The berms were supposed to shield a small number of pedestrians from the noise and traffic, Evitts said.

By contrast, now an average of 160,000 to 180,000 business owners, residents and visitors walk around downtown each day, he said. The berms frustrated pedestrians and bus passengers waiting at the stop by forcing them into a narrow

sidewalk area.

"We've been slowly, gradually working with private stakeholders and the city to take down the berms and replace them with grade-level landscaping," Evitts said. It's already happened at Pratt and Charles streets, where the trees often created a dark sidewalk space.

The trees were not good varieties for city streets because of their short lifespan, Evitts added, and rats were living in the berms. The grade-level landscaping will also allow better stormwater management.

Crews for the Baltimore Department of Transportation, which maintains the **Inner Harbor**, had removed the trees and brought the grass down to street level, said spokeswoman Adrienne Barnes.

New sod and trees will be planted in the fall, she said. The new area will take up more of the park but won't extend as close to the corner as it does now, Evitts said.

"That will give more area for people to cross at the corner, and more room where the bulk of pedestrians move," he said.

Roadway construction for the Baltimore Grand Prix slowed down the berm project, Evitts said. Right now, it's on hold for a few weeks while the Grand Prix work continues on the other side of the street. But the goal is to have it sodded and cleaned up by the end of September, he said.

Officials are also considering how to balance the desire for trees in that area with the need to put up grandstands for the race.

"Our plan is to have as many trees as possible," he said. "That's only one weekend of the year, and this is one of the signature corners in Baltimore."

Ultimately, planners hope to connect McKeldin Square with the harbor promenade and the space between the Harborplace pavilions. This idea requires moving the northbound lanes of Light Street so they run parallel to the

southbound lanes.

"This is a temporary fix until that longer-term plan can be funded and enacted," Evitts said.

The changes sounded good to Stato. "I was shocked when they cut down those trees, but it does sound like they put some thought into it," she said. "So many people use that downtown area. It's good that they're maintaining it."

**Who can fix this:** City residents should call 311 to report problems.