

Consalvo's concerns don't grate on business

By Wayne Woodlief | Thursday, March 18, 2010 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Op-Ed

No way is it crazy to hold a City Council hearing on encouraging a phased-in replacement of those ugly, unsafe storefront metal grates with modern perforated grill gates you can see through. As long as merchants are given time to get through this recession so they can afford to get rid of those blighting graffiti-magnet metal ones, it makes sense.

It also isn't silly or loopy, as a Herald story and bold headline proclaimed on Tuesday, to think about rubberized sidewalks - right, recycled rubber, shock-resistant and easier for walking - on streets where adjacent tree roots have caused concrete to bulge, risking pedestrian life and limb.

These are among the brainstorms of District 5 City Councilor Rob Consalvo, a neighborhood-guy, who deserves to be praised, not mocked, for thinking (and proposing) outside the box.

"The news story sounded as if I want to mandate replacing those grates," Consalvo said yesterday. "I've just filed an order for a hearing, to bring business, neighborhood people, city officials and experts to the table."

It's a safety issue too, he says, because police and fire respondents can't see through the metal grates, thus leaving them at risk to an unseen gunman or sudden blast of fire.

City Council President Mike Ross also thinks Consalvo's grate idea is a great idea. In his latest online newsletter, Ross said, "By cracking down on graffiti and litter, communities often see more violent crime rates drop."

Consalvo got his grate replacement idea from a similar phased-in program in New York City. An ordinance there gives merchants until 2026 to gradually put up perforated grates. "That's a phase-in of more than 15 years. I'm not even asking for that. I just want to start a discussion."

Good enough. Merchants like Carlos Icaza, president of the Jamaica Plain Business and Professional Association, agree that the metal grates "create a very unfriendly business atmosphere."

As for those rubberized sidewalks, they're getting some support in the neighborhoods. Mike Feloney, executive director of the Southwest Boston Community Development Corp., said that bulging concrete, especially in Roslindale Village, endangers walkers. "As the son of an elderly mother, I'm very concerned about these tripping hazards," he said.

So for him and others - including conservation advocates - it's bring on the rubber. Let's think about it, at least.

Consalvo is a down-to-earth councilor, attuned to the bread-and-butter needs of his district. I know; I'm a constituent. But he is innovative, too, in ways that have helped the whole city.

Two examples: A "shot-spotter" law, using acoustic technology to enable police to immediately identify where gunfire is coming from - an invaluable aid in high-crime neighborhoods. And a requirement that mortgage holders register foreclosed properties. That's important, said Feloney, because it had been hard to track down property owners and hold them responsible for code violations.

"Not every idea of mine would be the right fit for Boston," Consalvo said. "But some will, and how will we know unless we talk about them?"

We won't. And that truly would be a shame. No joke.

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