

# Tonawanda taking out mystery steps as part of roundabout project

Stephen T. Watson

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Work is underway to remove a set of concrete stairs at the end of the sidewalk at the corner of Harrison and Parker in Tonawanda, October 17, 2022. The stairs had made it impossible for a person in a wheelchair to get across the street by conventional means.

Libby March

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**T**onawanda is removing one of its oddest features as part of a big step toward improving accessibility and safety along a busy town thoroughfare.

The town on Monday began digging out two sets of steps built into the sidewalk at Parker Boulevard and Harrison Avenue.

The steps, with metal handrails, were built on the northwest and southwest corners of the intersection at least 50 years ago. They make it challenging for people with disabilities or mobility issues to get around those corners, and that is why the town is demolishing the steps and replacing them with a gently sloping sidewalk, officials said.

### Tonawanda Steps

From left: Town of Tonawanda Deputy Supervisor Shannon Patch, Supervisor Joseph Emminger and Councilman Carl Szarek speak at a new conference at the Intersection of Parker Boulevard and Harrison Avenue.

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"So that it's easier to get up and down, so that it's more walkable, more accessible and just better for everyone in our community," Deputy Supervisor Shannon Patch said Monday at Parker and Harrison as crews prepared for the excavation work.

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The step replacement is part of a larger "Complete Streets" project the town took on this summer, featuring mini-roundabouts installed at three intersections along Parker.

They are meant to slow traffic and make those intersections at Harrison, Decatur Road and Englewood Avenue safer for pedestrians, bicyclists and motorists alike.

"That's the 21st century transportation model," Supervisor Joseph Emminger said Monday. "And so, this is our first one that we're really doing in the town, but I don't think it'll be the last one."

Town officials said they weren't sure how old the steps – four on the northwest corner and three on the southwest corner – are. In a 2014 interview, then-Highway Superintendent Bill Swanson, then 57, said he had lived in the town his entire life, and they had been in place as long as he could remember.

The section of Harrison to the west of the intersection with Parker is higher than Parker itself.

Decades ago, **Swanson said in the earlier interview**, Harrison and neighboring streets were "unimproved" and lined with ditches, with sidewalks added as homes were built.

"When they put the new road in, they left the stairs," he said then. "Otherwise, they would have had to put a retaining wall up to get rid of the stairs."

The steps are not compliant with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act that passed decades after their construction, Patch said, and people who use a wheelchair or walker, or who are visually impaired, have been forced to adapt.

"I think that what's happened with these stairs for many, many years is that people have just gone up to a different street, gone into the street, done something unsafe or inconvenient for them to make it work," she said.

Also, Emminger said some people have sued the town over incidents involving the steps, though he didn't immediately know the details or outcomes of those suits.

Crews on Monday afternoon were set to take out the steps, to be replaced late this month or next month by gradually sloping sidewalks.

The work is taking place at one of three intersections along Parker where the town is installing mini-roundabouts. Emminger said Parker is one of the busiest roads – if not the busiest road – in Tonawanda that is the town's responsibility.



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He said there have been a number of accidents along Parker, including at the intersection with Harrison. Town officials said safety is improved at roundabouts because vehicles are forced to slow down, and it is easier for pedestrians and other non-motorists to cross those intersections.

The roundabouts were slammed by some residents, and town officials have worked to try to win public support for the project.

It will take time for motorists to get used to driving through them. Monday morning, as officials waited to begin a news conference at Parker and Harrison, one driver honked at another as both tried to navigate the recently installed roundabout.

"When they put in the roundabouts in Hamburg, and when they put in the roundabouts in Amherst and Cheektowaga, yeah, there was public outcry, for lack of a better word," Emminger said. "But I think that dies down as people get used to them. And we're confident that the same will happen here."

The town used \$1.3 million in federal grant money to pay for the roundabouts and the step replacement, Emminger said.

The town was eligible for a portion of that funding because, at the Parker and Decatur intersection, a roundabout replaced a traffic light, Emminger said. Roundabouts are considered more environmentally friendly because you don't have vehicles idling as long waiting for a light to change.

**By Stephen T. Watson**

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