

City officials seeking stability when winds whip Niagara Square

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An ill wind blows around Niagara Square on blustery days, and City Hall trouble-shooters are searching for ways to protect pedestrians from being swept off their feet.

Anyone who visits downtown's government district knows about the challenges people face on wind-whipped days.

"It's really nasty," said Mary Ellen Muscarella, who works downtown and was visiting City Hall on Wednesday. "There have been older ladies hanging off street poles because it gets so bad."

One man was blown to the ground in the middle of the street near Niagara Square five years ago only weeks after he underwent hip surgery. His name is Leonard A. Matarese, and he is Buffalo's human resources commissioner.

"There are days when it's really dangerous," said Matarese. "We have a lot of older people working in the building and visiting the building."

City Finance Commissioner Janet Penksa is far from being a senior citizen, but her petite size makes it tough to do battle with downtown's ferocious winds.

"Being a lightweight, I can't sometimes make my way down the street," Penksa lamented. "I wish I had a ton of bricks in my backpack."

Both Penksa and Matarese sit on Buffalo's accountability panel, and the problems posed by wild winds surfaced at Wednesday's meeting. CitiStat panelists have directed the Public Works Department to come up with some ideas to help make the area around City Hall and the City Court Building more walker-friendly.

Acting Public Works Commissioner Steven Stepniak said he will look at some strategies that were used in earlier eras. For example, he said, the city used to put up ropes around Niagara Square on windy days, giving people something to grasp as they battled strong gusts. Stepniak said he needs to find out if the ropes caused other safety risks before pursuing the option.

Another possibility, he said, might be to install rails near the windiest spots around Niagara Square. He also wants to talk with officials from other cities, including Chicago, to see how they help pedestrians weather the elements.

"Someone out there has to have some ideas," Stepniak said.

One wind-aversion technique is already working in another part of downtown, said Buffalo Place Executive Director Michael Schmand. A glass windscreen has been in place near HSBC Center ever since Metro Rail opened. Another windscreen is located at Main and Seneca streets.

“They make a huge difference. They really cut down on winds,” said Schmand, whose agency maintains the structures that are owned by the city.

One wind-busting tactic that city officials won’t consider involves a strategy dreamed up back in 1976. Former Mayor Stanley Makowski took heat when he decided to erect a brick wall around Niagara Square in front of City Hall. The public outcry was so intense that construction of what some branded “Fort Makowski” was halted shortly after it began.

Stepniak said anything that hinders visibility can pose safety risks and make some people feel less secure.

“You don’t want it to look like there’s walls around [Niagara Square],” he said.