

How New Orleans is using the Super Bowl to make the entire city more accessible

More than 550 infrastructure projects are underway to upgrade sidewalks and roads, and make the city easier for residents and visitors to enjoy.

Few areas of the country are as steeped in history, architecture, culture, and outright revelry as New Orleans. It's a tourist draw year-round. The compact French Quarter, boasting 500 eateries and 100 attractions, gained plaudits from a recent study naming the district the [country's most walkable](#).

That, of course, isn't true for everyone—especially Americans with disabilities, mobility or otherwise. With the city set to host the Super Bowl on February 9, its eleventh, local advocates and leaders hope they can use the big game as a catalyst for change, and improve the city so that everyone can enjoy it.

“I think for Super Bowls, we see cities take a beautification approach, as opposed to a functional approach,” says Mark Raymond Jr., a local disability advocate who serves on the Regional Transit Authority Board of Commissioners. “We need to do both.”

A quadriplegic after a diving accident who [runs an adaptive gym](#) for people with disabilities, Raymond wants New Orleans to dramatically improve accessibility before the championship game. He sees the most viable path forward as a combination of infrastructure improvements—fixing the sidewalks, fixing the streets, and making sure the curb cuts are good—as well as improved communication, and letting differently abled fans understand that they can have a great experience.

The city has been focused on infrastructure improvements throughout downtown, he says, and has gathered insights from the disability community. A video series he did about accessible travel [showcases the progress](#), but there's more to come. The city, state, and local business groups are managing approximately 550 infrastructure projects, said Michael Hecht, CEO of Greater New Orleans, the local economic development

organization. Altogether, roughly two dozen organizations aim to do approximately \$60 million of work in the next five months, which include upgrading sidewalks, roads, and rights of way. That is, if every project gets finished on time.

“This amounts to trying to do a decade’s worth of deferred maintenance [before] the Super Bowl,” says Hecht, who is also the state coordinator for infrastructure for the Super Bowl.

The challenges of upgrading a historic city

Filled with older buildings, cracked sidewalks, and narrow passage and roads, the historic city can be [especially challenging for wheelchair users](#) or those with mobility challenges. It’s also difficult to update, since there are so many historic preservation requirements to use cobblestones or other traditional paving materials.

A 2019 lawsuit against the local transit system argued the [city’s streetcar wasn’t accessible](#). Even today, on the landmark streetcar system, just 3 of 54 cars are ADA accessible, and 6 of 62 stops are accessible; local Rep. Troy Carter secured \$5.5 million from the federal government in May to study ways to [improve the streetcar’s accessibility](#).

“The message I hope shines the brightest is, we understand that we have not historically done a great job,” Raymond says. “We are reckoning with that, vow to do better, and here’s how we are going to implement it.”

These kinds of improvements help attract a rapidly growing segment of the travel market year round—not just for the big event. The 28 million Americans with disabilities [collectively spend about \\$58.7 billion annually, per a 2020 survey](#) (with more than two-thirds complaining of major obstacles from hotels, airports, and airlines).

During this summer’s Paris Olympics, where organizers expected 280,000 fans with disabilities to attend, organizers unveiled [a raft of new technologies](#) as part of its [larger plan for inclusiveness](#). That included new audio description services, Vision Pads that helped visually impaired fans track the action of the ball during play, [traffic light remote controls](#), and apps to help fans find their seats on trains. Los Angeles, host of the games in 2028, [has begun to plan](#), seeking to commit millions of dollars to improve streets, sidewalks, and transit stops, and attempt to fix its own lack of accessible infrastructure.

Using sporting events as a catalyst for change

The Olympic Games and similar big events can be a great catalyst for change, says Kyle Walker, Board President of the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification, who helped work on accessibility issues for the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics.

“A lot of things that they put into place in Salt Lake stayed after the international crowd left,” he says. “Those things that remained helped people who lived their whole lives there that have disabilities.”

But the simple fact that cities need to do this kind of work highlights a major problem. Many people thought once the nation passed the Americans With Disabilities Act, which mandated more accessible architecture and design for public space, in 1990, the problem would be solved. But many cities design to the bare legal minimum required by the ADA, which Walker argues isn’t nearly enough. A [rolling series of lawsuits](#) against major U.S. transit systems around a lack of accessible transit stations underscores this point.

“That’s unfortunate because, again, I think that anytime a city works to make itself more welcoming and fully inclusive and equitable, I think that helps everybody,” says Walker.

While New Orleans wants to make sure the Super Bowl runs smoothly—it’s expected to have [a half a billion dollar economic impact](#)—Hecht emphasizes that this isn’t a case of “lipstick on a pig;” all the work is meant to be durable and last a decade.

“The hallmark of a modern city is excellent accessibility for all citizens,” he said. “The Super Bowl effort is serving as a forcing function to help us modernize New Orleans, and in that sense, it’s going to be very productive for us.”

Redesigning the Superdome

While the NFL has made efforts to support inclusivity around the game, there have been complaints: for instance, last year, deaf fans felt [sign language broadcasting fell short](#).

The Superdome, where the New Orleans Saints play and where the game will take place, just opened the fall football season with a revamped interior, courtesy of local firm Trahan Architects. It includes many efforts to improve accessibility, like removing its [infamous ramps](#). It’s a significant milestone, especially because of the venue’s tragic past. During the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a wheelchair-bound resident died at a nearby convention center after trying to get to the Superdome; the stadium’s ramps provided shelter for those left homeless by the natural disaster. Venue owners were also [sued in 2018](#) for failing to provide proper accessible wheelchair seating.

Trahan Architects’s plan, in addition to removing the large concrete ramps and replacing them with light-filled atriums and escalators, included adding more accessible seating and carving accessible pathways through the stadium bowl, giving fans with disabilities easier access to seating throughout the venue.

“How, as an architect, can we contribute to humanity in other ways that are equally meaningful to society?” says Trey Trahan. “It’s not enough just to think about the physicality

of building. We have to think about the atmospheres we create. We need to create spaces where each person feels equally important, and not a secondary citizen.”

As the Super Bowl has become a bigger and bigger event in recent years—Hecht compares it to a “mini-Olympics” that stretches for multiple days—the stakes get raised: It takes more to make a good impression, but there are also more resources and funding to make all fans more comfortable. He’s confident that by February 9, the most critical sidewalks and right-of-ways around the Superdome entertainment district will be finished.

And just because New Orleans is historic doesn’t mean it can’t change. As Walker noted, Paris also has a deep history, but he admired the willingness of Parisian organizers to strike a balance: They didn’t abandon history, but made sure that it was accessible.

“They seem to have put disability accessibility right at the forefront of all of their thinking and planning,” he says. “I would like to see the Super Bowl and the NFL and the city of New Orleans take a very similar approach. How do we really challenge the status quo by making this event and the city much more accessible to people of all types of disabilities?”

And these kinds of efforts carry importance beyond fandom and tourism. Increased awareness can lead to policy changes, more long-term investments in accessible infrastructure, and better city planning. Disability Law United recently filed public records requests and found New Orleans’s disaster planning [isn’t sufficient for residents with disabilities](#). Efforts to improve how cities operate during celebrations and big sporting events can make cities that much more resilient during terrible disasters as well.