

COMMON COUNCIL REPORT

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Report Date	March 19, 2025
Meeting Date	March 24, 2025
Service Area	Public Works and Transportation Services

Her Worship Mayor Donna Noade Reardon and Members of Common Council

SUBJECT: Winter Plowing Results and Improvements

AUTHORIZATION

Primary Author	Commissioner/Dept. Head	Chief Administrative Officer
<i>Tim O'Reilly</i>	<i>Michael Hugenholtz</i>	<i>J. Brent McGovern</i>

RECOMMENDATION

Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to review sidewalk service delivery options to improve achievement of sidewalk service objectives in the City's Winter Management Plan and make recommendations as part of the 2026 General Operating Budget process.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2024-2025 winter season was challenging for both the community and for meeting service standards defined in the city's Winter Management Plan (WMP). This report details some of the challenges. More importantly, this report also focuses on what was, will, and could be done to overcome these challenges by a variety of stakeholders, resulting in improved outcomes relative to service standards. Improvement options discussed in this report include:

- Efficiencies and process improvements largely within control of City staff,
- Adjusting service standard expectations, and
- Increasing resources through future Operating Budget decisions of Common Council.

It is important to have alignment between service-level standards and the resources allocated to achieve these. It is becoming apparent that this is no longer the case in the sidewalk winter maintenance service so adjustments must be made.

PREVIOUS RESOLUTION

N/A

REPORT

A Challenging Winter

The 2024-2025 winter season was challenging. Six recorded storms (those generating 7 cm or more of snow accumulation) occurred during the season. There were an additional 14 days with at least 1 cm of snow, many also requiring a plowing and salting response. There were additional thaw and freeze cycles causing water to turn to ice. There were over sixty days where temperatures dropped below -10 Celsius, when salt stops melting ice effectively. Only two times in the previous four winter seasons has a winter storm registered as severe as the one that occurred between Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. The last official storm, on February 16, included ice pellets, rain, then freezing temperatures resulting in rapid and wide-spread ice on streets and sidewalks. The combination of successive storms this winter generated snow that started to significantly reduce available space for pedestrians and motorists within the City right-of-way, particularly in dense areas Uptown and on narrow streets.

Appended to this report is a high-level summary of the six storms that occurred during the 2024-2025.

Fixed Resources While Demand Fluctuates

City resources available to respond to winter storms are relatively fixed. There are a finite number of pieces of equipment and operators available to plow streets and sidewalks. Each available resource either plows 35 lane-kilometers of streets or 20 kilometers of sidewalks and not every available piece of equipment can respond equally to the range of weather events that occur. Some very limited contingency of resources are available for street plowing with no contingency for sidewalk plowing.

While resources are relatively fixed, the weather is not. More severe winter storms and an overall severe season, as were experienced during the winter of 2024-2025, can and do overcome the city's fixed response resources. When resources are overcome, service outcomes are compromised.

Particular Challenges in 2024-2025 Winter Season

The 2024-2025 winter season created resource limitations, in both obvious and less obvious ways. The following are a few examples of how resources were specifically limited this past season:

- **Sidewalk plowing equipment:** On average, approximately 50-60% of the 11 sidewalk plows were available during response to storms this past season, dropping to as low as approximately 25% on some occasions. With each sidewalk plow clearing 20 KM of sidewalks each storm, and

no contingency when equipment is unavailable, clearing of many sidewalks were significantly delayed this season.

- **Space available due to roadside snow and ice accumulation:** The accumulation of snow and ice that became stored on the edge of roadways due to the successive storms began to significantly limit space available for vehicles and pedestrians.
- **Space available due to significance of parked vehicles:** Significant levels of on-street parking remained during snow clean-up efforts. These parked vehicles further constrained space available to moving vehicles and pedestrians and significantly impacted crews' ability to plow and remove snow. During overnight parking bans, contracted towing resources were limited or completely unavailable, resulting in the vast majority of illegally parked vehicles remaining through the ban preventing a full clearing effort. Police resources were largely unavailable to support the towing of vehicles in situations where Police are the only authority to approve it.
- **Salt Supply:** Both city salt domes were fully stocked with salt before the 2024-2025 season, as is the plan every year. Orders for additional salt were placed within the season as stock began to deplete. Given the successive and types of storms in the 2024-2025 season, and the fact regional demand also spiked affecting rate of supply of salt, the city's salt supply reduced below critical levels on a number of occasions.
- **Operator Experience Levels:** Similar to many organizations, employee turnover within the City's Public Works Department is more than what has been historically experienced. Approximately 20% of the city employees who clear snow have 2 years or less tenure with the city. Although base level equipment competency is important as part of the hiring process, it takes time for team members to become comfortable operating the range of city snow clearing equipment in the range of conditions experienced.

A summary of the City's Winter Management Plan service standards and how well these service standards were achieved in the 2024-2025 season are appended to this report.

Overcoming Challenges to Meet Service Standards More Consistently

How can challenges, such as those experienced during the 2024-2025 winter season, be overcome to more consistently achieve service standards defined in the Winter Management Plan? Three options are discussed:

1. Efficiencies and process improvements largely within control by City staff,
2. Increasing resources through future Operating Budget decisions of Common Council, and
3. Adjusting service deliverable expectations.

Efforts can, are, and will continue to be made by your city staff team to overcome challenges to ensure service standards are achieved as often as possible with available resources, including:

- **Smoothing sidewalk plow lifecycles:** The current age of the city's fleet of sidewalk plowing equipment is one of the factors believed to most impact low availability during the 2024-2025 season. Nine (9) of the 11 sidewalk plows are at least 9 years old with only one replaced in the last 5 years. More sidewalk plows closer to the expected life of this equipment (12 years) means more equipment is likely to require unplanned repairs at the same time. The funded Public Works fleet reserve has been reassessed, and replacement of sidewalk plows has been prioritized with three planned to be replaced potentially in time for the 2025-2026 season with further replacements planned in subsequent years. In addition, there have to be adjustments to the overall amortization of this equipment to improve outcomes. These options will be investigated thoroughly in advance of budget discussions later this year.
- **Spare sidewalk plows:** Over the last few years a number of street plows that have reached the end of their useful life have been kept for as long as repair costs are manageable to fill in for any of the 27 larger street plowing routes. With intent to replace three sidewalk plows, one or more of the sidewalk plows being replaced will also be kept, using the same philosophy as street plowing to ensure there are more situations where a sidewalk plow is available for most, if not all, of the 11 sidewalk plow routes.
- **Increasing percentage of serviced sidewalks plowed with street plow wing:** Most serviced sidewalks in the city are plowed with smaller plows. These smaller plows are more suited for clearing sidewalks as they can fit on a 1.5-metre-wide sidewalk, include salt or sand spreading capabilities, and can also be deployed with smaller blowers. However, there are drawbacks with these smaller plows including that they are slower and less powerful than street plows, and sidewalk clearing is delayed when the equipment is not available. It is possible and currently completed in select areas of the city that a street plow uses its plow wing to also clear the sidewalk, overcoming many of these challenges. In addition, this method results in the snow along the curb line being cleared, which provides better accessibility at crosswalks and to Transit buses and helps prevent ice build-up on sidewalks and at catch basins. Currently, the city clears 11 km of serviced sidewalks with street plow wings, with an intent to increase this three-fold (to 33 km) for the 2025-2026 season. It should be noted that this approach is only possible in areas where the sidewalk is adjacent to the curb and there are no obstructions (i.e. light poles, signs) in the way.
- **Shift to more street-by-street parking bans:** City staff grew concerned with the mounting snow and ice accumulating on streets and sidewalks through the 2024-2025 season. A large number of vehicles remaining

during overnight parking bans led to loss of clearing efficiency and effectiveness. City staff shifted strategy into the season to instead focus on street-by-street parking bans during the day, a method also permitted by city by-law. Although this change in approach reduced the number of streets that could have enhanced snow clearing and is more administratively burdensome, the change resulted in a higher level of service to streets in which the ban was applied. Fewer vehicles remained illegally parked during times of these street-by-street bans, largely because parking remained permitted on adjacent streets. Towing resources were available more often, however demand for towing decreased with the increase in compliance. This practice would be continued into the 2025-2026 season if compliance issues during overnight bans repeated.

- **Exploring greater parking fines and increased parking enforcement staff authority:** Currently underway is a review jointly between the General Counsel Office and the City's Parking Division with goals of recommending *substantially* greater fines for illegal parking that affects snow clearing efforts. The review will also identify if parking enforcement staff can authorize towing in more circumstances. Intent is that the risk of a substantially greater fine would encourage greater voluntary compliance, and where compliance is not voluntary, provide more opportunities to remove vehicles remained illegally parked. Specific recommendations would be brought back to Common Council at a later date in 2025.
- **Salt Supply Contingency:** When the city's salt supply reached critical levels in the 2024-2025 season, city staff engaged a second supplier to increase rate of salt delivery. This measure prevented the city from risking running out of salt and allowed our supply to be restored above critical levels. This contingency would be deployed again in a future season if needed.
- **Salt Use Reduction Steps:** To further decrease risk in future years of salt supply reaching critical levels, and to continue to progress toward a City Strategic Plan goal of reducing salt usage by 5%, city staff will be taking further steps in 2025 to reduce salt usage by focusing on training staff on salt management techniques and increasing usage of salt pre-wetting during storms.
- **Pre-Season Preparations and Training:** The reality is that Public Works team-mates and much of the equipment used to clear streets and sidewalks in the winter are the same as what is needed to deliver other Public Works services Spring through Fall. However, time is needed between an end to delivering the other services in the Fall and being ready for the first winter storm of a season, whenever that may come. The severity of the 2024-2025 season coupled with the need to build experience with increased employee turnover emphasizes the need for the community to understand that Public Works must have a defined

date after which winter season preparation is prioritized over any remaining construction activities.

- **Coordination Through Season:** The more severe 2024-2025 season, coupled with the challenges presented in this report, required a heightened level of coordination. Using training and philosophy of the city's approach to Emergency Management, cross-departmental coordination meetings occurred to address challenges, plan response, ensure awareness, and debrief responses through the 2024-2025 season. Five city service areas (Public Works, Parking, Fleet, Communications, Customer Service) participated in meetings over the season, sometimes daily. As many as 17 planning items were addressed per meeting. Coordinated communications extended between meetings with the use of a dedicated text group. This heightened approach will again be used in future seasons, frequency relative to storm or winter severity.

In addition to the above measures that City staff will take, Common Council could approve additional funding through the 2026 General Fund Operating Budget to more often meet current service standards. The CAO will include recommendations for bolstering current service levels as part of the 2026 General Operating Budget preparation.

Common Council could also direct City staff to recommend adjusting service standards defined in the Winter Management Plan to match the current approved budget levels. This would largely impact the timelines for clearing of sidewalks. There were resource reductions put in place as part of the sustainability initiatives that impacted this service area. It has become clear that resource levels need to be adjusted to meet service level objectives for a more severe winter such as what we just experienced. Should increased investment into this service not align with the priorities of Council then Council could direct the CAO to come back with adjusted service level standards as part of the budget process.

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

This report aligns with the city's Winter Management Plan and the city's 10 Year Strategic Plan.

SERVICE AND FINANCIAL OUTCOMES

Although this report mainly highlights efforts within limits of the General Fund Operating Budget to improve delivery Winter Management Plan service objectives, there are limits to service efficiency efforts. Funding changes through the annual budget approval process or lowering service expectations would also affect consistency of meeting service objectives.

City staff notes that the majority of trails in Forest Hills that are identified as being serviced in the Winter Management Plan were indeed able to be serviced through the past winter. Only one of the trails (the one between Mountain Road and Glengarry Drive) was unable to be consistently serviced. City staff had noted last Fall that the deteriorated nature of these trails may prevent consistent clearing with larger accumulations of snow.

INPUT FROM OTHER SERVICE AREAS AND STAKEHOLDERS

The following additional service areas provided input: Parking, Fleet, Communications, and Customer Service. These same service areas also had to increase their focus of resources with the more severe winter conditions.

ATTACHMENTS

- *Summary of Winter Management Plan Service Standards*
- *Summary of Storm Severities and Service Deliverables in 2024-2025 Winter Season*
- *City Staff presentation*