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# Appendix B: Focus Group Methodology

**P**art of the snow and ice control information used in this review came from a series of small-group meetings, or focus groups, held around Minnesota. Participants were practitioners in the field of snow and ice control. This appendix describes the purpose and general results of the focus groups.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of holding focus groups was two-fold. First, we wanted input on defining effective snow and ice control from people knowledgeable about winter maintenance. Based on our preliminary research, we developed a list of 13 items that we believed were important to effective snow and ice control. We wanted practitioners to verify whether these items were indeed important to snow and ice control.

### Focus Group Discussion Items

1. **Snow policies and plans**
2. **Route planning**
3. **Operator training and scheduling**
4. **Snowplowing techniques**
5. **Applying and storing materials**
6. **Communications with employees and the public**
7. **Passive snow control measures**
8. **Preventive maintenance and equipment improvements**
9. **Cooperation/coordination of snowplowing services and equipment**
10. **Contracting for services**
11. **Measuring performance of services**
12. **Budgeting for equipment replacement**
13. **Information systems**

Second, we wanted ideas about effective practices from professionals in the field. We asked focus group participants to help identify counties, cities, and townships that had innovative or effective snow and ice control operations. We wanted to add the names of local governments identified in focus groups to others that had already come to our attention through survey analysis as possible sites to visit. After identifying local governments with effective practices, we planned to visit those jurisdictions and gather detailed information about their practices.

## METHODOLOGY

To organize and conduct the focus groups, we used a firm experienced in facilitating small group meetings and working with local governments. We decided to hold focus group meetings in a variety of locations to attain the viewpoints of practitioners from different regions of Minnesota. We held two in the Twin Cities metropolitan area and four outside the metropolitan area: in Owatonna, Willmar, Detroit Lakes, and Virginia. In addition to the focus groups, we held one-on-one interviews with representatives from the public works departments in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Participants came from counties and cities with both large and small populations. Although we contacted townships, most of the township representatives declined to participate because they do not provide plowing services directly but instead contract with other entities for those services. Public works directors comprised some of the groups, and street superintendents and operators comprised the others. Participants came from 55 counties and cities in Minnesota. (See Table B1.)

Each of the focus groups followed the same format and lasted about two and a half hours. Participants spent about one-third of the time discussing what they thought were the key ingredients of an effective snow and ice control program as well as any innovative practices they themselves used or knew others to use. During the remainder of the time, participants learned about and reacted to the 13 items that we believed were important to effective snow and ice control.

### SUMMARY RESULTS

The focus groups provided us with reactions to the material we had prepared regarding effective snow and ice control. Participants concluded it was useful to divide the items defining effective snow and ice control between those affecting daily operations and those related to longer-term planning and administration.

Although participants generally believed the 13 items were a fairly comprehensive set of considerations about snow and ice control, they thought some elements deserved greater emphasis. For example, several groups indicated that public information and education about snowplowing and ice control are particularly important. Other participants thought the environmental ramifications of storing and spreading materials on the roads required special emphasis.

We also received names of cities and counties identified by focus group participants as jurisdictions that were effective or that were trying innovative practices. We included some of these local governments among the group of 34 that we visited or called for inter-

views regarding their best practices. (See Appendix C for more information about the site visits.)

Focus group participants also gave us their general impressions about this review of snow and ice control practices. They were eager for new information about snow and ice control, particularly ideas from their colleagues elsewhere in the state. They also indicated they would not be receptive to a review that requires local governments to adopt practices mandated by the state.

Overall, participants stressed the need to recognize that because conditions vary greatly from community to community, it is unrealistic to expect one set of practices to apply in all circumstances. Variations exist not only in the size of community, number and type of roads, and geographic location, but also in the preferences of residents and leadership philosophy within a jurisdiction.

**Table B1: Jurisdictions Participating in Focus Groups**

10 COUNTIES		
Brown	Mahnoman	Steele
Clay	Nicollet	Waseca
Faribault	Otter Tail	Wilkin
Hubbard		
45 CITIES		
Aitkin	Cook	New Hope
Apply Valley	Crookston	New Ulm
Atwater	Detroit Lakes	North Mankato
Babbitt	Eagan	Oakdale
Belgrade	Freeport	Owatonna
Bemidji	Gilbert	Paynesville
Bird Island	Golden Valley	Pine City
Biwabik	Grove City	Raymond
Blaine	Hinckley	Richfield
Bloomington	Hoyt Lakes	Roseville
Brooklyn Park	La Crescent	Saint Peter
Buhl	Madison	Silver Bay
Burnsville	Maplewood	Spicer
Chanhassen	Minnnetonka	White Bear Lake
Clara City	Moorhead	Woodbury