
Appendix E: Developing Written Snow Policies

PURPOSES

Snow and ice control policies provide a common understanding of the extent of a jurisdiction's winter road maintenance activities. A department systematically defines the scope and level of its services in a snowplowing policy. The policy clearly states what services the department will and will not provide. It describes the priority roads or routes that receive immediate attention in a jurisdiction. The policy also describes priorities the jurisdiction places on various winter maintenance activities, while acknowledging limitations of resources, personnel, and equipment. Snowplowing policies can afford jurisdictions some protection against liability, instruct maintenance employees about their department's expectations, and help the public understand the operations of the department.

Written snow policies, adopted by a jurisdiction's governing body and illustrating the policy decisions over competing needs for safe roads, personnel safety, and budget constraints, can help protect against liability in lawsuits. The policy should reflect thoughtful consideration of service delivery constraints such as time, money, equipment, local traffic demands, public safety, and personnel safety. Operators following reasonable policies based on decisions by elected officials that balance limited resources and demands for services can reduce a jurisdiction's exposure to liability, absent negligence on the part of operators.¹

Snowplowing and ice control policies also serve an important informational function. Written policies communicate to members of the public what services they can reasonably expect. The documents describe information about winter operations that are matters of policy affecting citizens' lives such as

parking restrictions and the typical time plowing begins. In addition, written policies clarify a department's expectations of operators in the performance of their duties.

ELEMENTS IN A SNOW POLICY

Each jurisdiction's snow policy should reflect its individual needs and circumstances. Agencies may want to consider the following elements as they develop their policies:

Setting Snowplowing Priorities

The department may classify roads by priority and assign a level of service based on their priority. The policy can make clear that operators will plow high-priority roads first. In jurisdictions with many roads or routes, maps can show the location and priority for plowing.

Commencing Snowplowing Operations

The policy may state when plowing of all roads, or when other plowing or sanding operations, will typically begin. For instance, the policy could state that snowfall accumulations of a certain depth will trigger the start of snowplowing operations. For some winter operations, such as sanding icy spots, the policy may specify that road and weather conditions dictate the start. The policy may include information about how the department will notify residents about the start of plowing, if necessary for effective plowing.

Spreading Sand, Salt, and Other Chemicals

The department may describe its policies regarding what materials, such as sand, salt, or other chemi-

¹ Much of the discussion on liability results from the outcomes of two Minnesota court cases: *Hennes v. Patterson*, 443 N.W. 2d 198 (Minn. App. 1989) and *Gorecki v. County of Hennepin*, 443 N.W. 2d 236, 239 (Minn. App. 1989). Although the cases were similar, the court decided in the first case that the public agency involved was immune from liability because operators followed policies resulting from planning level decisions requiring the evaluation of financial, social, economic and other effects of the policy.

cals, it will spread on roads. The department may identify the areas, such as intersections or hills, where operators will typically spread these materials. The policy may suggest that use of materials could vary depending on weather and road conditions.

Regulating Parking

Jurisdictions with roads that allow on-street parking may need to regulate parking during plowing operations. The policy may describe what parking restrictions the jurisdiction will enforce, when parking restrictions commence, and how the department will notify residents about the restrictions.

Plowing Sidewalks and Alleys

In jurisdictions with sidewalks and alleys, department officials can state whether it is their policy to plow them. The department can set priorities among sidewalks and alleys and determine in what order operators will plow sidewalks or alleys relative to other plowing or sanding operations. Maps can show the location of sidewalks and the level of priority for plowing.

Plowing Procedures

If a department has plowing procedures it intends operators to routinely follow as a matter of policy, it may describe them in the written document. However, to retain flexibility, agencies should take care to keep the description to issues of policy and leave details about techniques to other plans or documents. As an example, agencies may make it their policy to plow snow in a residential area to the curb line and follow the initial plowing by later winging the snow back onto the boulevard. If this is a policy that the department routinely follows, the policy document may specify that the department wings back snow, but only as a secondary priority.

In addition, the policy may address specific concerns dealing with the unique characteristics of a jurisdiction. For instance, jurisdictions with bridges may have policies for plowing bridges and for the timing of that plowing.

Removing Snow

The policy may state whether operators load and haul snow, and if so, from what areas. If the jurisdiction's policy is to haul snow, the department may describe what priority the hauling takes relative to other operations. In addition, the department may specify its usual clean-up activities, such as widening turn lanes, and indicate the lower priority of these activities.

Allowing for Variable Weather Conditions

Climatic factors influence the methods used to combat snow and or ice. Department officials can indicate in their policy that snow and ice control operations will proceed when weather conditions do not endanger the safety of employees. In addition, they can state that varying conditions may necessitate changes from normal operations.

Outlining the Responsibilities of Residents

Officials may want to use the policy to delineate the responsibilities of residents. This can distinguish the services provided by the department from those the jurisdiction expects residents to provide. Residential responsibilities may include clearing: drive-ways, sidewalks, areas around trash cans, mailboxes, newspaper tubes, and fire hydrants.

Repairing Property Damage

Officials can state whether it is their policy to repair damage to property, such as mailboxes or sod, caused during plowing operations. The policy can describe the type and extent of repairs for which the jurisdiction is responsible.

Managing Complaints and Requests for Service

A department may outline its policy regarding handling complaints and requests for service from residents or other road users. The policy may indicate what priority the department will give to such requests.

