

# Preparing for Winter

(from *Maine Townsman*, November 2003)

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Long before winds gust, flakes fly and frost covers windshields, highway crews throughout Maine are preparing for winter. Town garage mechanics begin inspecting and tuning up plow trucks, sanders, graders and bucket loaders as soon as fall arrives. They want to have everything in top shape, ready to go when the first storm hits.

“It’s a lot less costly to catch something before you have a catastrophe,” says Scott Kenoyer, fleet-service manager for the Augusta Public Works Department. “Sometimes you can catch something before it breaks down and causes a problem.”

Public works crews in the capital, like their counterparts across Maine, normally gear up for winter in October. As laborers paint plows and prepare equipment, four mechanics and a shop foreman conduct safety and mechanical checks on the city’s fleet of 21 plow vehicles. They inspect everything from heaters to hydraulic systems, knowing that attention to detail now is likely to prevent problems during storms.

“There would be three times as many breakdowns” without preventive maintenance, Kenoyer says.

But readying equipment is only half the job. Public works in Augusta, as in most service center communities, also must review its plow routes and procedures to ensure that traffic flows smoothly when storms hit. Roughly 35,000 cars and trucks a day enter the city, and most use four-lane Western Avenue. In a city that receives an average snowfall of 77 inches, keeping 300 lane miles of roads clear has its moments.

“You can’t get out of the city of Augusta without going down a hill,” says John Charest, the city’s public-works director since 1982. During snowstorms, the city normally sets the lights on Western Avenue to blink, hoping to keep traffic flowing.

Even so, many of the 30 equipment operators must remain diligent and watch out for problems. Drivers “are bound and determined to get past these plow trucks,” says Charest. “It’s very nerve-wracking in town.”

Still, he credits his drivers with keeping their cool in difficult conditions. “People don’t understand, and they don’t want to understand,” Charest says. “They want to drive the same in January as they do in June. They don’t slow down.”

## **PORTLAND PERSPECTIVE**

In Maine’s largest city, preparation for winter begins in July, when the Department of Public Works solicits bids for salt and sand. To get through winter storm season, the city typically must order 7,000 tons of salt and 3,500 cubic yards of sand.

Around the same time, city officials begin looking at plow routes that cover 320 lane miles of roads. Always, they are looking for more efficiencies, striving to ensure that the streets are cleared as quickly as possible to get people where they need to go. Attention in October turns to the 38 pieces of equipment that sand and clear the city's streets. Mechanics spend most of the fall inspecting and priming plows, sanders, snowblowers and other devices, making sure they are in good shape for the first storm, which normally hits in late November or early December. No one wants to be caught unprepared.

"We want to make sure that when the first flakes fly, we're ready to hit the streets," says Peter DeWitt, Portland's communications director.

Tackling large winter storms is a team effort involving most of the city's 140 public works employees. In the hours before an expected storm, the first trucks roll out and spread a layer of what DeWitt calls Ice Ban Magic. The substance helps keep snow from sticking and freezing to roadways. When snow finally does begin accumulating, plows hit the streets and stay out for as long as it takes. During especially bad storms, mechanics, drivers and other equipment operators remain on duty virtually around the clock. Not surprisingly, the lion's share of the city's \$900,000 winter roads budget covers personnel costs.

Communication remains a significant part of the city's snow-removal operations. Dealing with winter in Portland means spreading the word as quickly as possible about parking bans. Hundreds of people who normally leave their vehicles on the street must find other parking places when storms hit. Many of the city's streets are simply too narrow to accommodate both snowplows and parked cars.

On-street parking "would impede our efforts to clear the streets," DeWitt says. "We want to make sure our emergency personnel can get to where they need to go quickly."

City employees regularly post warnings about parking bans and alert the news media. In addition, the city also now notifies people by pager and even e-mail, maintaining lists of people requesting such notification.

But where do all those cars go? The city maintains seven to eight off-street parking lots, giving motorists a place to go during snowstorms. In addition, several parking garages in the city reduce their rates to assist snow-removal efforts. "We have a lot of people who rely on off-street parking," DeWitt says.

In Portland, spreading the word about parking bans and storm-related issues also means reaching the hundreds of recent arrivals for whom English isn't their first language. The city, according to DeWitt, has developed a good relationship with the multilingual office in the Portland School Department. The office keeps in close contact with neighborhood leaders, who help spread the word that people need to move their cars during snowstorms. "An educated public is a public that helps us do our job," DeWitt says.

Once a storm has passed, the city faces the challenge of removing the piles of plowed snow. Public works crews and some private contractors, hired by the city, try to remove snow mounds

from the downtown area between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. most days, striving to have the streets reopened by the time people begin heading for work. The tons of removed snow are trucked to the city's snow dump, on outer Congress Street.

The city's merchants and property owners also must do their part. An ordinance requires people to keep sidewalks clear of snow and ice, so that shoppers, children heading for school and other people on foot can get where they need to go safely. For the most part, DeWitt says, people cooperate.

"Customer service is a big issue for us," DeWitt says.

### **SMALL-TOWN EFFORTS**

As road commissioner in Mexico, David Errington oversees a five-person highway crew that handles 29 miles of roads. Not surprisingly, they prepare for winter long before the first flakes fly. When fall arrives, his workers begin inspecting the town's three plow trucks, bucket loader and sand trucks. No one wants a breakdown during a big storm.

"It pretty much takes the month of October to get everything done," says Errington, road commissioner for a decade in the western Maine town of 2,959 residents.

As in most other communities, Errington relies on the police department to alert him to potential problems, especially at night. "When it gets a little bit slippery, they'll call us," he says.

From then on, the highway crew remains out until roads are clear of snow and ice, which poses particular challenges for a small crew in the western foothills. "We have a lot of hills, and intersection traffic is our biggest challenge," Errington says.

Afterward, as night falls, those same workers scramble to clear piles of plowed snow from Main Street and other heavily traveled roads, especially those with sidewalks. The goal is to have everything reopened by 7 a.m. "We take the sanders out of the trucks and haul the snow off," he says.

In smaller communities, winter maintenance falls largely to family-owned businesses that in many cases have held the jobs for years.

In the Waldo County town of Lincolnville, with 2,042 residents, Bernard Young has been road commissioner since 1980. His small earthwork company routinely handles winter maintenance on the town's 54 miles of roads, having bid successfully for the job. Young, his son and a third man sand all of the town's roads and plow half of them. Plowing the remaining 27 miles falls to a second contractor, Larry Thomas, who works with a single employee.

"It takes five of us to maintain the roads," says Young, who's been plowing for nearly half a century.

Young's equipment includes 3-yard sand trucks and heavy-duty four-wheel-drive pickups equipped with plows. Mechanics begin tuning up his small fleet, which sits for most of the summer, in September. He normally handles roughly 20 storms a year on an annual budget, including salt and sand, of \$178,178. After so many years, he knows what to expect, and he's likely to stay in the job for as long as townspeople will have him.

"I've done it so long, it's not a big problem," says Young, who normally rolls out when there is an inch of snow on the ground. "I know every pothole."

In Etna, about a 20-minute drive south of Bangor, Town Manager James Hancock's winter-preparation list has one item: Ordering salt and sand. By necessity, the town of 1,012 residents relies on a private contractor to clear its 26 miles of locally maintained roads. R & R Lumber in nearby Carmel has held the plowing contract for at least the past four years.

As far as Hancock is concerned, the town's seven-month plowing contract of \$50,000 is a bargain, compared with what some other towns pay. The roads stay clear, and the town doesn't have to make an expensive capital investment in equipment. "With this, he handles everything," says Hancock, who also holds the title of road commissioner. "He does a number of towns around here . . . I couldn't be more pleased."

#### **NORTHERN EXPOSURE**

Long winters in Aroostook County call for planning, preparation — and cooperation. Clearing the more than 40 miles of roads in unorganized townships falls to county government. David Sokolich, the county's public works director, says it's impractical to maintain equipment for so few miles of roads cutting through 108 townships. So he hires private contractors and municipal public works departments.

"It makes more sense. It's a regional effort," Sokolich says. "They're already insured, and they have the equipment."

It costs the county roughly \$200,000 a year to care for the roads in its jurisdiction, a figure Sokolich says is kept relatively low through cooperative agreements with municipalities. He cites, as a prime example, the county's contract with St. Agatha to plow about 2.2 miles of roads in Township 17, Range 5. Before the agreement, St. Agatha crews simply turned around at the line. Now they keep going. The town will receive \$5,023 per mile — 21 percent less than the \$6,393 the county had been paying a private contractor.

"That was a considerable cost savings for us," Sokolich says. "It just made sense because they're just turning around 2 miles further, and they're going to get paid \$11,000 for doing that."

The county also maintains contracts with Blaine, Bridgewater, New Canada, New Sweden and Caribou.

Dave Bell, public works director in Caribou, doesn't mind the agreements. They generate extra money for the town, and he has the equipment. His crew handle 124 miles of roads in the

city of 8,300 residents and 12 more miles in nearby Connor Township. The job isn't limited to plowing and sanding. High winds cause frequent drifts that must be tackled vigilantly with snowblowers. "There's no down time," he says.

Bell supervises a crew of 13 equipment operators and three mechanics. They begin inspecting equipment in October, making sure the town's six two-axle vehicles and lone single-axle vehicle — a 7-ton truck — are ready for the first storm. "It takes anywhere from a week to two weeks per vehicle," he says.

But planning for winter in Aroostook County, according to Bell, begins months ahead of time. His crew spends all summer ditching roads and making other improvements designed to ensure that runoff doesn't create problem spots when the snow flies and temperatures drop below 32 degrees. Tackling winter, in a region where the season can last seven months, really is a year-round job.

"There are many, many things that need to be done," Bell says. "You know what you have to do."