Takoma Park Safe Roadways Committee
Snow & Ice Storm Response Recommendations to City Council

Issues

- *City staff plow snow into piles that block crosswalks*
- *City does not reliably clear snow from sidewalks where it has responsibility*
- *Little if any affirmative enforcement of current snow-clearing rules against private property owners*
- *Road clearing excellent for cars but not good for bikes*
- *Snow clearing on sidewalks at County parks in City does not reliably occur*

Background

Takoma Park Ordinance 2012-38 notes that "the City Council is committed to the goal of creating a sustainable, pedestrian-friendly and walkable community." Additionally, Council established the Safe Roadways Committee to "encourage Takoma Park residents to use alternatives to driving, including walking, bicycling, and transit." Despite these laudable goals, the recent series of snowstorms during Winter 2013 – 2014 revealed deficiencies in the City's approach to encouraging biking and pedestrian use.

Jackson Ave near Jackson-Boyd Park

Walking and biking during all times of the year is necessary to meet the City's stated goals. But it's particularly important to ensure that people can safely walk around the City during snow events. The City needs cars off roads and streets to ensure that it can safely and efficiently plow. But if walking is not safe, people will be forced to either utilize their private automobiles, or, if they are unable to drive or do not own a vehicle, many will be forced to remain isolated at home, unable to get to work, medical appointments, or other destinations.

Boston-area illustration image (not Takoma Park)

City Code requires that residents clear their sidewalks after a snowstorm.[1] City Code also requires that any snow removal be done "in a way so as not to obstruct the free passageway of any street, avenue or roadway" and that blocking such a street is a Class C offense.[2] The City should follow these rules closely.

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[1] "Every owner and occupant, jointly, of every parcel of real estate adjoining a public sidewalk shall keep the sidewalk adjoining the property free from snow and ice and for the full paved width of the sidewalk. *See* Takoma Park Municipal Code § 11.20.020.

[2] *See* Takoma Park Municipal Code § 11.20.080.

Committee Findings

The Takoma Park Public Works Department does a remarkable job of clearing City streets and roads for cars. The staff works tirelessly and efficiently and should be commended. The Committee found, however, that Public Works devotes considerably less effort to ensuring sidewalks in front of City and County Parks, sidewalk access ramps, and bike routes are clear. Many City-responsible sidewalks, access ramps, and bike routes were simply not cleared, or were not cleared until long after the roads were cleared (See left side photo, page 1). Where residents failed to clear their sidewalks, the City did not follow-up and clear the sidewalks itself, which it is encouraged to do by the Municipal Code.

925 Sligo Creek Parkway

The Committee found that City snowplows created linear barriers of snow blocking the ramps to sidewalks, making it impossible for wheelchair-users and even people walking to easily access the sidewalks. Additionally, in several cases snowplow drivers piled snow in a way that blocked crosswalks, and that these piles remained about a week after the storm.

The Committee also found that on at least one City street, City employees pushed the snow down the City street and piled it on a County-owned park path, blocking a crosswalk (see photo, left).

Additionally, while the road clearing is great for cars, bikes need a higher standard of road clearing to be safe. The Committee found that many icy patches remained in the streets after City plowing and salting efforts. Small patches of ice that have no effect on cars can be extremely dangerous to cyclists, causing wrecks and serious bodily harm. A common view is that bikes do not ride after snowstorms. The lack of riders, however, is likely a function of lack of perceived safety rather than demand – because the roads are not sufficiently clear, cyclists do not ride.

Moving from city-responsible properties to business- and resident-responsible properties, the Committee found that while the City has a code requirement for residents to clear sidewalks, compliance with this requirement was spotty. The snow hung around for nearly two weeks in the worst of the snowstorms, and many residents never cleared their sidewalks. Where they did, they frequently cleared only a narrow path, insufficient for persons with disabilities or for two pedestrians to pass side by side.

7777 Maple Avenue

Additionally, the committee found that at least one large apartment complex with a parking lot next to the sidewalk, plowed its snow from the parking lot directly onto the adjacent sidewalk making it virtually impossible to pass the four-foot mountain of snow (see photo, right).

Recommendations

Takoma Park needs to allocate some of those car-directed resources to ensuring safe pedestrian and bike access during and after snowstorms. In order to meet Council goals of encouraging residents to use alternatives to driving, pedestrian and bike routes should be cleared soon after storms. We understand, however, a preference of many citizens for car travel over walking, biking, and transit. In order to balance these competing interests, the Committee recommends the following:

Public Works Should Refocus Snow Clearing to Equally Emphasize Clearing for Pedestrians & Bikes: We recommend that a more balanced approach be utilized. Rather than focusing all the effort onto car routes, we recommend that Public Works split staff time equally between clearing sidewalks, bike routes, and car routes. As soon as road clearing begins, sidewalk clearing should simultaneously begin. The Committee recommends that an equal number of Public Works' crews be assigned to sidewalk and bike-route clearing as are assigned to road clearing for cars.

Sidewalk & Ramp Clearing Teams Should Follow Each Plow: In addition to clearing the actual sidewalks and ramps, after the plows pass crosswalk-access ramps, the plows leave a pile up snow, blocking access to and from those ramps (see photo, right). In order to remedy this, the Committee recommends that a sidewalk clearing team follow each plow and ensure that snow is cleared from blocking the access ramps to streets immediately after plowing. Failure to do that likely violates the Americans with Disabilities Act and seems to violate the Takoma Park Municipal Code. More importantly, ensuring sidewalk ramps are clear and safe is the right thing to do.

7105 Carroll Avenue

7009 Carroll Avenue

Never Pile Snow in Crosswalks, Ramps, or Bikeways: While road-clearing crews need places to pile snow during and after major snowstorms, piling snow in places that block crosswalks, ramps, and bike routes is not the answer (see photo to left). The Committee recommends that Public Works staff receive training on proper places to pile snow and that they be specifically instructed to never pile snow in crosswalks, in front of access ramps,

or in routes frequented by bicycles. If crosswalks, bike lanes, or sidewalk-access ramps are the only areas immediately available, the snow pile should be quickly removed by front loader and dump truck and placed elsewhere.

Plow Wider Lanes on Streets without Sidewalks to Accommodate Pedestrians & Bikes: Where plowing does occur, frequently a lane one to 1.5 car-widths wide is plowed. While this is adequate for cars, and has the beneficial impact of slowing traffic (narrower streets slow cars), for those many streets in the City without sidewalks, this road narrowing produces no room for pedestrians to walk in the street (see photo below). The Committee recommends, therefore, that City crews plow streets lacking sidewalks to a sufficient width to ensure room for cars *as well as* pedestrians and bikes.

1000 Block of Elm Avenue

Increase Enforcement of Clearing Laws After Storms: As mentioned, in addition to the problems with City property such as sidewalk-access ramps, bike lanes, and City-owned sidewalks, there seemed to be no enforcement against property owners who failed to clear their sidewalks within the required time. City Code *requires* the "Chief Police Officer [to] ascertain whether the public sidewalks have been cleared of snow and ice" after storms.[3] The Committee recommends, therefore, that the City begin strictly and affirmatively enforcing sidewalk clearing where residents fail to clear sidewalks for which they are responsible. Neighbors should not be placed in the position of complaining before the City takes action.

To accomplish this Committee recommendation, police officers and the City's code enforcement officer should travel around the City soon after a storm and begin writing civil warnings and citations. Additionally, Public Works should direct the removal of snow that's in violation of Chapter 11.20 and the City should issue fee letters to the owners of the property where the City was forced to act, as discussed in the Municipal Code.[4]

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[3] Takoma Park Municipal Code § 11.20.050.

[4] Takoma Park Municipal Code §§ 11.20.060 and 11.20.070.

Key pedestrian routes within the City such as routes to businesses, hospitals, transit, and schools should receive the first focus, then efforts should move to secondary routes. Only through a concerted enforcement effort will sidewalk clearing allow safe pedestrian access after snowstorms.

Finally, the City should increase communication with City residents, reminding them of their responsibility to clear sidewalks after storms.

Establish Bike-Snow Routes to Receive Extra Clearing of Ice and Snow: Finally, the Committee recommends that several "Bike Snow Routes" be created in the City that allow bike commuters to get safely from any point within the City to any other. This is particularly important with all of Takoma Park's hilly streets. The Committee is sensitive to the limited resources of Public Works after a snowstorm. Therefore, in order to not overtax Public Works crews by requiring immaculate clearing of all streets to bike standards, the Committee believes that additional focus on only these few limited Bike Snow Routes will provide sufficient safety for biking after snowstorms.

The committee further recommends that road clearing crews by trained in what constitutes satisfactory clearing for these Bike Snow Routes and that supervisors check the road crews' work to ensure these routes are cleared in a way that ensures bike safety.

Useful Resources on Snow Clearing for Pedestrians and Bikes

- http://www.projectaction.org/News/tabid/727/token/detail/nid/136/Default.aspx
- http://altaplanning.com/App_Content/files/Winter%20Bike%20Riding_White%20Paper_ALTA.pdf
- http://vimeo.com/17954162