



TECH BRIEF 2011-4

An Important Tool: A Personalized Winter Communication Plan

This brief focuses on the importance of proactive communication regarding winter maintenance operations. Developing a winter communication plan is certainly more effective when it is done year round and implemented prior to the first snow or ice storm. It is also important though, to continue communication through the winter season.

If your agency does not already have a communication plan in place, especially as part of your pre-winter planning and preparation, the Connecticut Technology Transfer Center encourages you to start one now. Many questions and issues can be alleviated or even eliminated if the public understands the process and what to expect. Whether or not you already have a plan, we hope the following information will provide you with some ideas of how to improve the communication portion of your winter maintenance season.



A well thought-out communication plan anticipates what the public needs to know and creates a consistent process for getting the word out in a timely way.

Roadway maintenance decision makers and personnel are busy right now reviewing pre-winter checklists, making sure orders are in for deicers and abrasives, plows are ready, spreaders calibrated and crews trained. Highway commissioners and public works directors should add one more thing to the list: Develop and implement an effective plan for communicating with the public.

It is easier to explain a winter maintenance operation to the public before the cold winds blow. Having to present the rationale behind an operation while fighting a storm, and fielding a blizzard of questions and complaints from frustrated members of the public, only makes a hard job harder.

A well thought-out communication plan anticipates what the public needs to know and creates a consistent process for getting the word out in a timely way. This proactive approach also intercepts potential problems and improves public relations for the department.

COMPILE FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Start by listing topics and issues residents frequently raise during the winter season. A short list should cover 80 percent or more of the usual queries and concerns. Some examples are:

- When will my street be plowed?
- Why did you pile snow at the end of my driveway? Will you come out to remove it?
- Where can I park during a snowstorm?
- Do I have to shovel/salt/sand my sidewalks? Or, my neighbor hasn't shoveled/salted/sanded his sidewalk!
- What will you do about my damaged mailbox?
- Records from past seasons and input from staff members who field calls can help with compiling a good list. The next step is to think about the information, policies and resources available to provide answers.

UPDATE POLICIES, DEVELOP MESSAGE

Prepare to communicate winter maintenance plans to the public. Provide general information and specific answers to the recurring questions. In the process, identify any policies that are out-of-date or ambiguous.

Begin with the list of typical questions and develop information that explains winter-storm priorities and service levels for different types of streets. Describe the time it takes once a storm ends to restore each street type to normal winter driving conditions. Define the normal conditions service level for each type.

Outline the agency's snow removal policy. Does it call for providing bare pavement curb-to-curb, bare pavement in wheel paths or plowed curb-to-curb with packed snow that is sanded? Let people know what road conditions to expect during and after a storm.

Avoid shorthand and acronyms in public-information materials and policy descriptions. Using unfamiliar terminology like Average Daily Traffic (ADT), arterial and collector can confuse. Instead, refer to streets as major, neighborhood, residential, two-lane, four-lane or in other recognizable terms.

Write or speak about the levels of service and time-till-completion after a storm as "goals." Explain that long-lasting storms, multiple storms close together and extreme cold can increase the time it takes to restore roads to normal winter driving conditions.

For issues like parking and sidewalk shoveling, translate relevant ordinances into simple language and make clear why they exist. Give people reasons behind the rules—so that snow-removal crews can do their jobs efficiently and effectively, and get safe streets open sooner—to help them appreciate how important it is to comply. Direct people to a source where they can read the complete ordinance if interested.

USE MULTIPLE OUTLETS

A sound communication plan uses a variety of media and methods to get the message out. Combining multiple outlets is the best way to reach local residents who depend on the community's winter maintenance services. It improves the odds of reaching everyone in the target audience and gives them repeat exposure to the message.

EFFECTIVE OPTIONS INCLUDE:

- Run an article in agency brochure or newsletter distributed to the public.
- Do a separate mailing about winter maintenance operations.
- Send a press release to local media—including daily or weekly newspapers, TV and radio outlets, shoppers and neighborhood newsletters.
- Hold a press conference to kick off the winter season.
- Create TV video and news photo opportunities by holding a media day at the maintenance yard to showcase seasonal equipment, introduce staff members and talk about the winter maintenance operation.
- Invite media contacts, elected officials or members of the public to ride along on a dry run of snow routes or during an actual storm event.
- Add or update information about winter operations on the local government's website and refresh the information frequently.
- Explore opportunities to air information on a community access cable station.
- Make presentations on the topic at meetings of service or community groups, like Rotary, Kiwanis, and Chamber of Commerce.
- Tailor a presentation for school groups to give children a hands-on experience that gets them excited about snow plowing and eager to share what they learn with parents.
- Exchange key contact information with media outlets so they have a direct link to the department during a storm and the department knows whom to reach with critical information for immediate broadcast or publication.
- Provide news about winter operations via a prerecorded telephone hotline, webpage or email message as a subscription service for residents. (Make updating this information integral to routine procedures.)



Proactive communication about upcoming winter maintenance offers a chance to be in touch with a positive message that invites interest and cooperation from customers.

KEEP IT POSITIVE

Much of the time, the contact highway and public works agencies have with the public emphasized prohibitions, what not to do. Warnings and alerts are important for public safety, but proactive communication about upcoming winter maintenance offers a chance to be in touch with a positive message that invites interest and cooperation from customers.

A good plan covers the operation's practical details and answers the top questions. It also informs the public which streets constitute the department's territory. Let them know about the people, equipment and materials available to fight winter storms. Describe anything innovative or different about the operation and how it improves outcomes for the public.

Let the public know what they can do to help make it a safe winter season. Highlight important issues or problems that hamper the maintenance operation, like residents shoveling, blowing or plowing snow into cleared streets, causing a safety hazard and requiring crews to plow the street again.

Include information about resources for staying safe on the roads in winter. Provide website links that offer basic tips on safe winter driving and incorporate these tips into agency communications.

WORTH THE INVESTMENT

An organized communication plan is a good addition to any road maintenance operation. It is worth the investment because it reaches both the media and the public with the message that the local agency is serious about running a professional, effective operation. Reinforce that message with ongoing communication as the season progresses. Educating these important audiences improves the relationship with customers and limits complaints and controversies during the snow season.

RESOURCES

October 2006 **APWA Reporter** article "Never Under-estimate the Power of PR Public Relations for Winter Operations."

Direct Web link:

http://www.apwa.net/Publications/Reporter/ReporterOnline/index.asp?DISPLAY=ISSUE&ISSUE_DATE=102006&ARTICLE_NUMBER=1379

September 2006 *American City and County* article "Getting the Drift"

Direct Web link:

http://americacityandcounty.com/features/government_getting_drift/



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