

Speaking Notes – Mike Davidson

Standing Policy Committee on Infrastructure and Public Works –
June 23, 2015

Re: Snow Clearing Review

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you regarding the Snow Clearing Review.

As you know, on February 10th this committee approved a motion to conduct an in-depth review of the city's snow clearing services, with particular focus on a cost and quality comparison between private contractors and city-run snow clearing services.

As I've mentioned in my remarks to both the standing committee and to EPC, the city has not seen a cost-benefit analysis of private snow clearing in at least 17 years.

In 2014 there was public outcry over the way in which private snow clearing contractors handled the brutal weather that hit the city.

Complaints included emergency responders who were concerned that fire, police, and paramedic service response times would be impacted, as well as potential damage to emergency vehicles.

These concerns were echoed by Manitoba Public Insurance which saw a drastic increase in road-related claims.

We know that Winnipeggers have concerns about snow clearing, and we know they want their voices heard.

It is for these reasons that on February 23rd, CUPE Local 500 launched a snow plowing hotline and website aimed at collecting stories from Winnipeggers about their experiences with snow plowing in our city.

CUPE 500's Snow Plowing Hotline resulted in hundreds of comments and concerns from across the city.

The full report will be issued at a later date, but I'll read you some preliminary results:

- CUPE 500 heard from nearly 400 Winnipeggers from across the entire city, with participants calling in and submitting comments to the online feedback form from every ward.
- Results indicate a high level of dissatisfaction across the entire city, with concerns being raised in every area of the city. The specific types of concerns themselves appear to be at least somewhat neighbourhood-specific.
- Over two-thirds of participants raised concerns or criticisms of snow plowing operations in the city, while the remainder indicated some degree of satisfaction or offered no opinion either way.
- The quality of plowing appears to be a recurring problem across the city. Concerns about the plow depth and width were mentioned often.
- Many participants felt that poor plowing has resulted in dangerous driving conditions, due to ruts and unnecessarily slippery roads, among other issues.

- Property damage caused by contracted plow operators was raised as a major issue by many participants, both to city property (curbs, etc) and to personal property (fences, lawns, etc).
- Many participants felt privatized plowing had negatively affected the City's accountability and reputation.
- Many participants believe that publicly operated snow plowing would be more transparent to citizens.

The fact that so many Winnipeggers have offered their concerns and ideas on snow plowing indicates strong public interest in this core city service.

Now we acknowledge that our project is not a “scientific” survey of residents. However we feel that the *real* comments and concerns expressed by hundreds of Winnipeggers should be valuable enough to the City and to Councillors to take seriously.

I'd like to read some of these real comments from the Snow Plow Hotline and Website.

Keep in mind these comments come from fellow Winnipeggers, and are only a sample of those we received.

The First few comments are related to Plowing Quality:
A Transcona resident said:

“I had to get out of my house and show the guy how to angle the blade to do a proper plow. Watched him and then he started doing a better job. His boss came and told him he can’t do it like that, it wears the blade out. He went back to the old way, and you could fit almost a newspaper underneath the blade. Totally unacceptable.”

A resident from St. James-Brooklands-Weston said:

“Contractors were clearly trying to save their graders’ blades. I get that they aren’t cheap by that’s what they are for. Skimming the surfaces and leaving ruts and undefined lanes is unsafe and extremely dangerous. The last City Council didn’t seem to care that this was happening and I’m glad this one is.”

With respect to concerns around Windrows:
One Winnipegger said:

“One year I was so ill, trying to get out to go to the doctor I passed out trying to shovel the windrow which was 2 ½ by 3 feet. Thank God a neighbourhood came along and found me.”

A resident from St. Vital said:

“The snow plows left huge blocks of ice all across the bottom foot of my driveway and drove over it. I tried to remove as much as I could but it is packed down from the driving over it and I now have to try and drive off the one side of my driveway so my car doesn’t scrape. I was in tears because I knew I would not be able to remove it. I’m a single mom and have a shoulder injury. What a sloppy job!”

Many Winnipeggers were upset about property damage. One Resident from River Heights-Fort Garry said:

“Our neighbourhood elm trees and 100-year-old cast-iron fences have been terribly damaged by plow work, especially [during] the winter of 2013-2014.”

Another resident from Fort-Rouge East Fort Garry said:

“A contractor for snow clearing hit our parked car... [the plow operator] admitted to being under a contract, but refused to give his name. A supervisor also under contract stopped by but also refused to leave any contact information. They continued to push that MPI and the City deal with accidents easily... MPI has filed suit against the contracting company who is refusing to cover the damages.... If a city worker had struck our car, there would be a record of who was working and this process would be simplified, and we wouldn’t have to pay a contractor to hit our car.”

Some respondents explicitly discussed the Private Contractors.

One Winnipegger said:

“Recently I witnessed [near my work] one of [a private contractor’s] loaders idling in the parking lot for 2 days. Not only did the employee scheduled to use this loader get out of his loader and leave in a cab not to return, but when my employer called the company to inform them, they had no clue it was sitting there all day. To top it off they left it sitting there running, wasting our tax dollars, for a total of about 48 hours. Why should we pay contractors all this money for them to just burn it away in situations like this?”

Another Winnipegger shared:

“My husband worked for many private contractors who had/has snow clearing contracts with the City of Winnipeg... [he once replied] to an ad on Kijiji that was posted during a heavy snow fall in 2011.... The owner was desperate enough to hire an operator, so desperate that he hired my husband over the computer without checking his qualifications or even asking him to produce a drivers’ license.. it was a surprise as to how old this loader was and safety was questionable. I would like to see the City take over snow clearing and have operators trained and operate safely.”

Now as you can see, Winnipeggers are concerned with many areas related to privately contracted snow clearing.

A common theme that arose was the fact that with private contractors, Winnipeggers have no recourse to deal with these concerns.

Many are simply directed to the contractors who are not accountable to the citizens of Winnipeg.

Our own Mayor and numerous Councillors have expressed similar concerns with these contractors, and it is our opinion that this work can be done more effectively, with higher quality, and with more transparency and accountability if the City crews and Public Works were responsible for this core service.

We believe our City crews are not only innovative, but also effective and accountable in their service delivery, and Winnipeggers deserve to have high quality public snow

clearing. This isn't just coming from us City workers, but it is also coming from the citizens of Winnipeg.

I'd like to thank you for your time today, and if you have any questions I'd be happy to answer.

Thank you.

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