

Duluth plow drivers chasing the snow as flakes keep coming

By [Adelie Bergstrom](#) on Feb 14, 2019 at 6:08 p.m.

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A snow plow makes its way down Rice Lake Road as snow continues to fall Thursday afternoon. Tyler Schank / tschank@duluthnews.com

More than 2 feet of snow has blanketed Duluth since Feb. 1, according to the National Weather Service, leaving the city's snow control and removal crews a bit overwhelmed.

So how does the city go about plowing its streets, especially when so much snow has fallen in a short period?

The city has a three-tier snow and ice control plan that prioritizes major streets — what the city calls "mains" — including emergency and school routes first. The second tier includes all other residential streets, and alleyways make up the third tier.

In the plan, the city says it strives to have two lanes cleared on all major (first-tier) routes within 36 hours after a snowfall. For secondary streets, the city sets a goal clearing one lane within 48 hours. The city's goal for clearing all roadways is 56 hours.

However, if the snow keeps coming, crews have to focus on the first-tier routes to make sure emergency routes stay clear, revisiting those roads repeatedly during a snow event.

On days when there is limited staffing or if plow drivers can't keep up with the snow and ice, the focus is on main arterial streets on steep inclines in and out of downtown Duluth.

The extra attention to main routes might mean a delay in plowing smaller residential streets, said Chad Bednar, street maintenance manager for the city.

"We haven't had this kind of snowfall in a continuous way in about five or six years," Bednar said.

Plows are sent out across the city to begin clearing snow on set routes. Drivers stay in constant contact with one another, and they try to help each other if someone falls behind.

No neighborhood or district of Duluth gets preferential treatment, Bednar said.

"(Plow) operators last week were working 70-80 hours," he said. "Occasionally, we do miss a dead end or something. Someone calls it in, and we thank them."

To that end, the city maintains its Winter Watch website, where residents can submit reports for streets that still need attention. There, residents also can see maps showing which city streets receive plowing priority. There also is a Winter Watch hotline at (218) 730-5100.

Bednar stresses that plow crews are doing their best to keep up.

"I think we've had some pretty easy winters," he said. "And this one hasn't been."

Plow drivers working 16-hour shifts

At a news conference Thursday at City Hall, officials thanked Duluth residents for their support and patience during a tough stretch of winter weather.

"The city remains committed to providing the highest level of service that we can while also looking internally at our operations and policies to make sure that they're efficient, effective and equitable for all neighborhoods," said Noah Schuchman, Duluth's chief administrative officer.

Duluth Public Works & Utilities Director Jim Benning reminded residents how they can help make the job easier for plow drivers, including:

- Following alternate-side parking rules. Benning said that by moving their cars during the designated switchover period from 4-8 p.m. Sundays, it allows plows to come by on Monday and clear parts of the street they couldn't access earlier. Benning said that police occasionally do ticket and tow cars parked on the wrong side of the street, but it's not a priority unless traffic is blocked.

- Moving garbage cans off the street. Benning said plow drivers will not go around garbage cans and will instead push them out of the way, potentially spilling contents onto the street.
- Keeping fire hydrants clear.

Bednar said the city's 38 plow drivers are working 16-hour shifts recently, with crews starting at 2 a.m. once the snow begins. Last week, once the snow ended on Thursday, Bednar said crews were able to get out and finish nearly all roadways by Saturday, with extra cleanup running into Sunday.

As for snow removal from sidewalks, Bednar said those efforts began downtown on about Jan. 15 and also worked in the Lincoln Park business district before snow and extreme cold forced a delay. Sellner said the city will go to the Spirit Valley business district along Grand and Central avenues next, in time for the Winter in the West community event on Feb. 23.

Benning said the city this summer plans review its snow emergency ordinance, written several decades ago.

"It's outdated and doesn't really work for us," he said.

'Trapped' on Park Point

Nancy Van Dyken's house on Park Point is on one of the many dead-end street stubs that leaf out from Minnesota Avenue.

Most residences are along Minnesota or Lake avenues, which make up the peninsula's main traffic artery, but there are clusters of homes on the small side streets that the plows routinely overlook, she said.

"The dead-end streets on Park Point here don't get plowed appropriately," she said Thursday. "I didn't have (any clearing) for four snowfalls. I've gotten to shoveling the end of my street so I can get a running start."

Van Dyken addressed the Duluth City Council on Monday evening to share her concerns.

"(Plowing on) Minnesota Avenue left a good 3- or 4-foot-high mounds of snow ... and my 77-year-old brother who has a serious heart condition and an 86-year-old neighbor were trying to shovel that," she told the council. "He was trapped inside, and if he had a heart (event), he couldn't get out. That's wrong, and it's been going on for years."

She said that a neighbor used to snowblow the entire street when plows didn't make it, but that neighbor has since moved away.

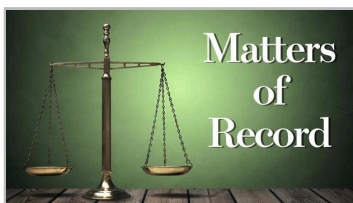
"Seven families are trapped on 35th and 36th Street, and I repeatedly call and say, 'Can you please plow? Can you please plow?' And sometimes they come, and sometimes they don't," she told the City Council on Monday. "We pay the highest taxes in the state (on Park Point), and plowing isn't getting done."

Though she wants better service and more training, Van Dyken is quick to acknowledge the hard work drivers face after a major snowfall.

"Every plow driver I've ever spoken to has been incredibly gracious and helpful," she said Thursday, adding that she spoke with Bednar this week.

"He called me and spent 15 minutes on the phone. He needs some praise, too," she said. "They've had a lot of snow; two trucks are down, and one guy is in the hospital. They don't have enough."

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