

We need clarity on when, how to plow snow

By: Chris Lorenc *Republished from the Winnipeg Free Press print edition January 15, 2015 A13 Posted: 2:02 AM*

Politicians and media have been quick to comment about the level and quality of snow-removal service delivered for Winnipeggers by the private sector.

But there is an important context the Manitoba Heavy Construction Association, which represents much of the industry engaged in City of Winnipeg snow-removal services, feels the public should be aware of in this discussion.

The levels of snow removal service are dictated by city policy -- a political decision. For example, by policy, residential streets are normally maintained to a compacted snow surface, not bare pavement. They are plowed to bare pavement only when conditions allow during an all-out plowing operation. Regional and collector streets, however, are normally maintained to bare pavement but only after snow accumulates beyond a depth of three centimeters, for regional, and five cm, in the case of collectors.

The decision to plow, how it's done and the timing for the delivery of snow-removal-service levels are governed by the city administration, which uses both city employees and private contractors to do the work.

Contractors only plow when called upon by the city, and according to the service levels as instructed by the city. For example, it is up to the city to call for the clearing of residential streets; this has not yet occurred this season. As well, it is the city that decides when to deploy truck plow operations when it snows, but not to bare pavement.

The advantage of private-sector snow-removal contracts to the taxpayer is that if conditions require repeat clearing, contractors do so until the standard is achieved at their cost, not the taxpayer's. Further, the work is completed within 36 hours.

As well, managing the snow-removal budget is a city political and administration responsibility. Snow-removal budgets are annually struck in November, and estimates of snowfall levels are made 12 months in advance, based upon best available information.

Such was the scenario leading into the 2013/14 winter. We all remember that one -- more snow, more cold, and more combined snow and cold than ever in our city's history. In attempting to "hold the budget line," judgment was exercised by the administration. Some decisions based upon weather forecasts and budget controls were successful and some not, but it was not for lack of effort. The same will be true for this and every year going forward.

The point to all of this is that if industry fails to measure up to performance standards called for in the contract, the city has contractual recourse at no additional expense to the taxpayer.

If, however, the level of service expected is inadequate in the public's mind, then that is a matter of city policy for the political world to revisit.

In early 2014, our association asked that a joint city-industry committee be struck so there could be clarification of what it was that policy and contracts expect of the industry. Progress was made. Its process, however, was abandoned in the late summer of 2014 because of the pending civic election.

We have asked for that committee to resume its work so the correct information can finally be put before the public and council. It will start meeting later this month.

The commitment from the MHCA and the industry it represents is that we want and need clarification of expectations as much as, if not more than, the public wants assurances that snow-removal services are delivered properly, and at the lowest possible price.

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