



CITY of CRYSTAL

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For questions about Crystal snow plow operations, contact Streets Superintendent Bill Bowman at bill.bowman@crystalmn.gov, 763-531-1164.

SNOW PLOWING FAQs

Q. How do I find out if a snow emergency has been declared?

A. Residents can find out if a snow emergency has been declared through the city's social media accounts, news outlets and the city website.

Q. My hill is icy. Can you send someone out to put salt/sand down?

A. Salt request locations will be checked as part of the normal checks of major roads and hills.

Q. Why doesn't the street get plowed to the curb?

A. When doing a full plow, city streets get plowed edge to edge. That said, as winter progresses and multiple snowfalls occur, the snowbanks on the side of the roads will get bigger making it more difficult to push the snow back and potentially acting like a berm to keep the snow from being pushed off the street completely. The city made a video to show this:

youtu.be/NtNgotCJQLY. Over time, this makes the roads narrower. If time allows, the city may go out and wing (push back) snow banks to allow more room for snow storage. Check out the video about winging: youtu.be/ejl9sf1yGPk.

Q. Why does it take so long for the streets to be plowed?

A. During an average snow event, it usually takes city crews around eight hours to complete a full plow of all city streets, alleys and parking lots. It may take longer for larger or back-to-back snow events.

Q. Why does the majority of the snow get plowed to my side of the street?

A. On the first plow, the left edge of the plow is generally along the high point (crown) of the road. This approach is important as the bottom of the plow blades are a straight edge, the plow cannot plow on both sides of the crown of the street. The vast majority of city streets have the crown in the center of the road. In situations where the crown is not in the center, one side will likely get more snow than the other. Other than the crown of the road, streets are plowed simply by pushing the snow from the center of the road over to the right side of the road. Plow operators have little control on where to put the snow. It just slides along the plow. This type of operation is the most efficient.

Q. Why is my alley plowed before the street?

A. Usually the city will start plowing the alleys 1-2 hours after the main plows start. Occasionally, a main road will get plowed a second time after the alley has been plowed. In situations such as this, the city will try and go back to clear the end of the alley again. Contact Public Works at publicworks@crystalmn.gov or 763-531-1164 if the end of an alley needs to be checked.

Q. Why does my alley have so much ice buildup?

A. Unlike roads, which have more space in each lane for vehicles to use, alleys only have one lane for all traffic that generally drives in the same tire tracks. This same tire path route causes considerable compaction of any accumulated snow. Due to the essential need of alleys to have storm water drainage, they are also “V” shaped with the middle of the alley generally being the lowest point. Similar to the peak (crown) of roads, plow blades are straight edges and can have a hard time scraping all of the width of the alley. The city is looking into some different equipment to try and improve the ability to remove compacted snow from alleys.

Q. Can the city lower the plows to scrape the snow off the roads better?

A. The plows are already scraping the snow off of the road. There is no way to lower them anymore than they already are.

Q. Why are the main roads always better than the side roads?

A. Roads such as Douglas, 42nd Ave., West Broadway, Winnetka, Bass Lake Road and Medicine Lake Road are county highways and maintained by Hennepin County. Due to the significantly higher volume and speeds on County Highways (as compared to city streets), the county is more aggressive in salt usage to get the roads back to bare pavement conditions. This aggressive usage of salt and other de-icing chemicals is not financially feasible for the city, would have a negative impact on city infrastructure (salt is corrosive) and would pollute storm water in our local waterways.

Q. The snow is piled so high it is creating a visibility issue. Can the city come out and remove some of the snow mounds?

A. After large or multiple snow events, where the snow banks are quite high on streets throughout the City, equipment is sent out to push back snow piles when needed.

Q. Is the city still plowing? If so, where are they? They have not come down my street yet.

A. When the city gets 1.5 inches of snow or more, it does a full plow of all city streets and alleys. If there is less than 1.5 inches in accumulation, the city may send out trucks to salt main roads and hills.

Q. The snowplow hit my garbage/recycling cart, and it's now in the street.

A. When plowing, snow is pushed from the center of the road to the side of the road. It is unlikely that a plow pushed it into the road. The city appreciates residents keeping their garbage carts out of the roadways and a few feet behind the curb.

Q. The snowplow hit my garbage/recycling cart.

A. Trash and recycling carts need to be placed off the street and behind the curb on collection day. The city is not responsible for damaged garbage/recycling carts. Call your hauler for a replacement cart if needed.

Q. Can you tell me when the plow will come by my house? I need to leave for work by 7 a.m.

A. After a snowfall of 1.5 inches, all city streets are plowed curb to curb. Crews work systematically to clear all the streets; however, routes may change due to a variety of factors such as parked vehicles or traffic. When the weather cooperates, crews start very early in the morning to clear main roads before the morning rush hour.

Q. If you don't know when the plows will come by, can residents just plow the street?

A. Residents cannot plow city streets.

Q. Can plows drive slower?

A. Snowplow trucks generally operate below 20 miles per hour while plowing residential streets. Due to the size of the truck and the noise of the engine, the trucks can appear to be traveling faster than they are.

Q. Can you lift or turn your plow at my driveway?

A. Operators will not lift or turn their plow at the ends of driveways. Doing so would leave a large pile of snow in the road, and turning the plow for every driveway is not feasible.

Q. Why has my street not been plowed all winter?

A. During snow events, the focus is on main roads and hills. After a snowfall of 1.5 inches, all city streets will be plowed edge to edge. It is unlikely a road would be intentionally missed. If you think your street has been missed, please contact the Streets Superintendent. With warmer temperatures and melting snow pack, it may turn slushy. Some residents may see the slush and think the road has not been plowed.

Q. Can you time plowing to give me time to remove the plow mound from my driveway early in the morning? When I come home from work I cannot get in my driveway.

A. A full snow plowing cleanup operation typically starts as soon as the snowfall has ended. When weather cooperates, crews will try and start early in the morning to complete most streets by 8 am.

Q. Would the snowplow please leave less or no snow at the end of my driveway?

A. The street is plowed by pushing the snow from the street to the side. The operator has very little control over how much snow is deposited at the end of driveways.

Q. Can you plow the snow away from (out of) the cul-de-sac, instead of around the cul-de-sac, leaving all of the snow in my yard?

A. To effectively plow the cul-de-sac, snow is pushed to the nearest curb. Cul-de-sacs have limited space for snow storage and it is a challenge to avoid driveways, mailboxes and fire hydrants.

Q. The snowplow damaged my mailbox. Who will fix it?

A. The city will conduct a review of each mailbox incident to determine whether a snowplow came into direct contact with it or its support structure. The city will only repair mailboxes actually hit by a snowplow and install it to United States Postal Service Residential Mailbox Standards. The city is not responsible for damage to mailboxes or support posts caused by snow or ice contacting the mailbox.

A. Based on the city's review, the city will repair the mailbox to an operational state. If the mailbox cannot be adequately repaired, the city will replace it with a standard size, non-decorative metal mailbox. The city may also replace the support post as necessary with a 4" x 4" decay-resistant wood support post, if necessary. Dents, scratches, or other superficial damage that does not prohibit normal use of the mailbox will be considered normal wear and tear and will not be repaired or replaced by the city.

Q. The snowplow damaged my yard. Who will fix it?

A. The property will be added to a list of repairs. Crews will restore damaged turf in the spring with dirt and seed. Property owners are responsible for watering, if needed.

Q. Do the plows damage the streets when plowing?

A. The plows simply push the snow from the center of the street to the side and do not generally damage the road. Plows may cause some minor sod damage which the city will repair in the spring. Sometimes, if manhole covers and other metal infrastructure in the street stick up above the asphalt pavement, they can be impacted. This is very rare. If you have a mailbox next to the roadway, to be sure it is within the United States Postal Service standards. Information on USPS mailbox standards can be found here. usps.com/manage/mailboxes.htm

Q. How many plows does the city have?

A. The city has six plow trucks, two sidewalk plows and six pieces of various equipment for plowing cul-de-sacs, dead ends, parking lots and trails.

Q. The street is getting narrow, can a plow come widen the road?

A. When plowing, the snow is simply being pushed to the side of the road. Over the course of the winter, the streets will get narrower as the banks get higher. If necessary, city crews may deploy equipment to push back snow banks.

Q. Can I push snow from my driveway into or across the street?

A. State Statute 169.42 prohibits snow from being pushed into or across the street.

Q. Can I park on the street after it has been plowed?

A. When a snow emergency is declared, no on-street parking is allowed until the streets are plowed edge to edge. There is no on street parking city-wide, 2 a.m. to 5 a.m. year around.

Q. Does the city ticket/tow for vehicles parked in the road during a snow event?

A. During or after a snow event, where the snow accumulation has exceeded 1.5 inches on the street and snow parking restrictions are put into effect, the city may ticket and/or tow.

Q. Can the city scrape and salt when it thaws?

A. City plows may go out and scrape roads during warmer weather (around freezing) to reduce the snow pack. The city does not have a bare pavement policy and snow pack will occur on most city streets.

Q. Why is my cul-de-sac always plowed last?

A. Cul-de-sacs see much less traffic than other city roads and are on a separate “cul-de-sac route.” Ideally a cul-de-sac will be plowed after the street is plowed so that a ridgeline of snow is not left where the cul-de-sac and street meet, similar to alleys.

Q. My cul-de-sac is icy. Can you send someone to put salt/sand down?

A. Major roadways and hills are top priority for addressing ice conditions. The city has a limited salt supply and budget available. Cul-de-sacs have very low traffic volumes and low speeds, and are therefore a lower priority.

Q. I am remodeling my home and have a dumpster in my driveway, I am asking the contractors to park on the street. Can you make sure they don't get tickets?

A. During a snowfall of 1.5 inches or more, no on-street parking is allowed until the street has been plowed curb-to-curb. This includes contractors. The parking restriction is in effect to allow plow operators to clear the entire street edge to edge of snow so the street can be returned to normal winter conditions as quickly as possible. Vehicles parked on the street not only hinder this process, they also reduce the efficiency of the plow trucks.

Q. What roads do Hennepin County and MnDOT plow?

A. MnDOT owns and maintains Hwy. 100. Hennepin County owns and maintains county highways in Crystal: Douglas Dr., West Broadway, Bass Lake Rd., Medicine Lake Rd., Winnetka Ave., and 42nd Ave.

Q. How is Crystal's snow plow operation different than MnDOT's?

A. Hwy. 100 serves nearly 100,000 vehicles per day that typically travel at highway speeds. The expectations for the road conditions are at a higher level (bare pavement or getting back to these conditions as quickly as feasible). MnDOT has the staff and equipment to run a 24-hour continuous operation, if needed, to get road conditions back to acceptable levels. In the City of Crystal, the busiest city street is 36th Ave. between Douglas Dr. and Hwy. 100 serving nearly 20,000 vehicles per day. After 36th Ave., the next highest volume streets are less than 4,000 vehicles per day. Over 60% of all the city's public works staff (across all public works divisions) have an assignment during a full plow. The city simply does not have the staff to run a continuous full plow operation. For more information on MnDOT's plowing operations, please visit: <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/maintenance/faq.html>

Q. What are public work's goals for winter roadway conditions?

A. The city's goal for the main streets is bare pavement in the wheel tracks. The exception is 36th Ave., where the goal is for bare pavement in each travel lane. For city streets with hills (not main streets), the goal is a bare pavement strip down the middle of the road. As noted previously, after 36th Ave., the next busiest streets have less than 4,000 vehicles per day. But the vast majority of Crystal streets have under 1,000 vehicles per day. This translates to around one vehicle per minute, even during busier times.

By providing a mostly bare pavement center strip on streets with hills (that are not main roads), drivers are able to get some of their wheels on bare pavement the vast majority of the time. On the flatter residential streets, there is not a bare pavement goal. Drivers are encouraged to drive slower and use care. That said, when the weather gets closer to 30 degrees, city crews go out and scrape the streets mechanically to remove the snow pack. This is more cost effective and environmentally friendly than trying to do the same with salt. While the goal is for various levels of bare pavement, weather conditions can significantly impact how quickly the goal can be met. Salt is not effective below 15F degrees and extended snow events or ones with significant accumulation will take longer to recover from.

SIDEWALKS

Q. Can you put salt/sand on the sidewalks?

A. The city does not salt/sand sidewalks. With the available resources it is just not feasible.

Q. What city resources are used for sidewalk snow removal?

A. The Crystal Public Works Maintenance Team has 22 employees. Fourteen staff members are assigned plow routes. Two of those routes are for sidewalks, because the city has two sidewalk machines. Regional trails (and wider trails, in general) are plowed with pickup trucks on different routes.

Q. Do different sidewalks have different priorities?

A. Yes, there is a priority sidewalk ranking. Those along county highways, such as 42nd Ave., Douglas Ave., Bass Lake Rd. and W. Broadway, are higher priority for pedestrian safety.

Q. When do snow removal operations start?

A. Under normal full-plow conditions, sidewalk routes begin between 4 and 5 a.m.; the city street plows start at 2 a.m. Sidewalks are delayed because they are adjacent to the street and plows push snow from the road onto the sidewalk. Furthermore, the county tends to plow the street multiple times, or do clean-up passes along the gutter line, and they throw snow back onto the sidewalk, too.

Q. Why are the sidewalks not cleared down to the concrete?

A. The sidewalk machines are intended for bulk snow removal. They travel between 1 – 5 mph, depending on conditions. Due to uneven sidewalk concrete, metal structures and other obstacles, the cutting edge (bottom) of the plow or blower cannot scrape the sidewalk down to the bare concrete. Hand shoveling sidewalks almost always results in a cleaner surface but is not feasible for the miles the City needs to clear. Even personal snow blowers generally leave behind a thin layer of snow.

Q. Why does the sidewalk plow throw snow all over the steps to my house after I have already cleaned them?

A. During the snow removal process, it is difficult to see all features along a route due to the blowing snow. Sometimes the regular route driver is unavailable and another staff member covers the route who is less familiar with it. Operators try to minimize the amount of snow placed on already cleared driveways, walkways and stairs, but some snow will miss the target due to the nature of the operation. If there is a specific concern or question, please contact the streets superintendent.

Q. Why did the city decide to plow ALL city sidewalks?

A. Prior to the decision, the city removed snow from 30 miles of sidewalk, leaving about three miles unplowed. City Code required all property owners to remove snow from the sidewalk in front of their home within 12 hours of a snowfall ending. This requirement was rarely enforced, and the city could not meet its own 12-hour limit. Furthermore, snow removal is funded through property taxes, and some property owners in the three-mile, unplowed areas thought it was unfair. Another reason is that sidewalks are a public transportation system and a public good, and therefore it was reasoned, should be cleared.

Q. What public notification was done regarding the change in the sidewalk snow removal policy?

A. The proposed changes were discussed at a council work session and council meeting. At the time, a number of media sources including Sun Post newspaper, CCX Media, StarTribune, City Pages and KSTP shared stories on the change.

StarTribune article: <http://strib.mn/3b0oF3P>

SunPost article: <http://bit.ly/3o1xRbM>

Q. Could sidewalks be cleared any faster after it snows?

A. From the time when the snow stops to when the sidewalk is cleared could only be reduced with more resources. It would require another staff member and sidewalk machine (about \$160,000). Since snow removal operations are funded by property taxes, there would be an impact on property taxes.

OTHER

Q. Does the city clear snow away from fire hydrants?

A. The city does not have the resources to clear snow away from all city fire hydrants. It is strongly encouraged that the home owner take responsibility for clearing the snow away from a fire hydrant in their yard. The West Metro Fire Department has an Adopt a Hydrant program. For more information, please visit: <http://www.wmfrd.org/public-education/adopt-a-hydrant>.

Q. There is too much snow at the end of my driveway. Will the city plow it?

A. The city is not responsible for plowing privately-owned parking lots and driveways, and does not have the resources to do it.

Q. Why is salt bad for the environment?

A. When salt is applied to streets the salt cannot be re-captured. According to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, one teaspoon of salt contaminates five gallons of water (<https://www.pca.state.mn.us/water/salt-and-water-quality>). The salt can also be hard on the plants and grass along the roadways. The previous link provides the best and most accurate information regarding the concerns about salt impact on water quality. Some other resources include this MPR story: <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2017/12/06/road-salt-water-pollution> and another MPCA article: <https://www.pca.state.mn.us/water/salty-water-growing-problem-minnesota>

Q. Does salt have a negative impact on infrastructure like it does on vehicles?

A. Salt is corrosive to infrastructure and vehicles. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency has a website with some information on the impacts of chlorides (salt) on infrastructure: <http://tinyurl.com/y8zysjb2>. Here is an article from Michigan as well: <http://tinyurl.com/yagpkf8p>.

Q. What source does the city use for weather forecast information?

A. Crystal Public Works uses the information provided by the National Weather Service for all winter operation decision making. This information is free and available to the public at www.weather.gov/mpx.

Q. What is the most important thing drivers should be aware of when plows are out?

A. The drivers need room to work. This includes backing up. Stay back and do not crowd the plow.

Q. What is one thing the public may not know about winter operations?

A. During the summer, the city receives various speeding and cut-through traffic complaints from residents. The goal of winter operations is to provide improved road conditions on main roads. A side benefit is that drivers should drive slower on residential streets and stay on main roads as close to their destination as possible rather than drive through a neighborhood. Snow removal operations are a balancing act between making the roads operational, environmental impacts, infrastructure impacts and cost considerations. We do expect drivers to drive slower on residential streets in the winter, but they should be able to get to and from their home, which is why the main roads and hills have varying levels of bare pavement goals.