



Township of Egg Harbor

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Snow Plowing in EHT December 2009

Dear Editor:

There has been substantial debate in reference to the effectiveness of the snow plowing throughout the region during the 20 inch snow event of December 19-20. Some individuals have been quite critical of the response and disappointed with the efforts of municipal operations.

In EHT we budget for and prepare for traditional snow events in Atlantic County. These traditional snows are generally 4 – 6 inches and occasionally 8 inches. The snow of last month is the first of that magnitude since 1996. Responding to a snow of two feet requires residents and municipal operations to display patience and understand that it will not be business as usual within a few hours of the snow stopping.

Because it is rare for this area to have a regular need or use for that type of preparation for an event of that magnitude, the resources to be utilized are unavailable. With money being tight, the Township does not purchase equipment for a once in a decade event. We don't want to waste our resources for events that rarely happen.

So to the point; is it possible for EHT to be prepared to effectively handle blizzard conditions? Absolutely! However, would it be wise to purchase and maintain 4 to 5 million dollars of additional equipment and supplies along with the operators trained in their use when we live in an area that often goes for years with average snowfalls of less than 4 inches per event?

How many of those who criticize the snow removal operations did their part to assist the plowing operation by keeping their vehicles parked off the street in accordance with the municipal law that prohibits parking on snow covered streets?

EHT has over 400 miles of municipal streets. Even with the large trucks equipped with 11ft. wide plows, it requires a minimum of 3 passes to get the streets plowed curb to curb. Those 400 miles translate into 1200 miles of plowing. Snow equipment is generally able to maintain an average speed of 10 miles per hour when cars are not parked in the street. The reality is that the average speed is somewhere around 5 miles per hour when plowing heavy snow on residential streets. Add in vehicles parked on the street, a few hundred cul-de-sacs and the pace slows to a crawl. The trucks have great difficulty effectively maneuvering when displacing as much as 25tons of static weight. Therefore, in heavy deep snow it takes considerable time to make headway.

To plow 4-6 inches of snow it usually takes 12 to 18 hours to get through the Township one time. We utilize 10 trucks averaging 10 miles per hour. Our priority is to open the through streets first (i.e. West Jersey, Ridge, Tremont, Delaware, Hingston, Blackman, and Robert Best to name a few) in order to get residents out to the County and State roadways. Once they are open, we the plow subdivisions (neighborhoods). Last to plow are dead ends and cul-de-sacs.

Plowing snow is very hard on equipment. EHT purchases heavy duty commercial grade trucks and attachments. Still, inevitably breakdowns and damage occurs. When that happens, the equipment is out of service until it can be repaired. For nearly 3 weeks after the blizzard, the vehicle maintenance division has been busy repairing frames, replacing cutting edges, straightening bent parts and preparing for the next snowfall.

I was on duty at the public works facility during the snow removal operation. I can assure you that our employees gave 100% throughout the operation. During snow operations our plowing schedule does get sidetracked in order to support police, fire and ambulances emergencies. Those emergencies divert manpower and equipment to assist with gaining access to our neighbors in need. Once the emergency response is completed the plow returns to the prior plowing schedule.

We are all aware that with the current economic crunch public works is working with 8 employees less than 2008. The depth of staffing affects the number of people available to not only plow . . . but also it adversely affects support and maintenance personnel that keep the wheels of municipal services rolling. Once we activated our snow removal operation, I had two teams of employees working 12 hour shifts for the next 72 hours to remove the snow.

A few residents stated they saw EHT trucks traveling with their plows in the air. That does happen at times. While travelling on County and State roadways the plows are always lifted. It is not our responsibility to plow these roads. At other times the truck is heading to the shop for a repair or returning to their route after a repair or refueling.

Could the effectiveness of the operation improve? Absolutely! We commit to take steps to enhance our operation and we learn lessons from these events. We can also partner together with the residents to help each other and understand that we are not and cannot be prepared or equipped like the City of Buffalo.

A simple step like keeping vehicles parked off the street is something we can all do to expedite the process and get us up and moving as quickly as possible.

Alan Simerson
Director of Public Works