

Winter Operations Plan

Town and Village staff have updated the joint Winter Operations Plan for both communities. A draft of the complete document is on the Town webpage under the Public Works Departmental Section. The public is invited to comment. Both Boards will be discussing the Plan at their Joint Meeting on October 26, 2020.

The Plan remains virtually unchanged from the previous year with the important exception being the impact of operating under the COVID-19 pandemic. That information is described in the document but also provided in the following paragraphs from the Plan:

SPECIAL CONDITIONS FOR WINTER OPERATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

CURRENT SITUATION: All Public Works and governmental operations continue to be impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic at the time of preparation of the Winter Operations Plan (September 2020). Municipal offices remain closed to the Public, masks are required when in buildings or when people have less than six feet of separation, no vaccine has yet been approved or distributed, and all meetings continue to use remote conferencing. It is anticipated that all operations for the entire winter will continue to occur under these conditions.

Public Works winter operations are at great risk of being severely interrupted due to the pandemic. Both the Village and the Town have limited staffs with very few personnel available for back-up in the event that employees are sick and cannot work. It requires a significant amount of training to properly and safely operate the heavy-duty plow trucks, sidewalk plows and other winter equipment. In the past, many employees have come to work with colds and with minor flu symptoms. With COVID, some of these employees may have to be sent home if they experience symptoms similar to those of the pandemic. If an employee tests positive for COVID, additional precautions will have to be put in place, including but not limited to the use of shifts. Winter storms may occur that cannot be fully covered in a timely fashion by plow or sidewalk crews. Delays will occur and the expected current service levels will be negatively impacted.

Private contractors may be able to help but those doing winter plowing already have existing contracts in the private sector and will only be able to assist after they have satisfied their contractual agreements. In most cases, this may be 24 to 48 hours after a major storm event.

The plow and sidewalk crews of both Essex Junction and the Town of Essex, in emergency situations and as the need arises, may be directed to assist operations in either community until manpower or equipment shortages can be brought back to a normal level of operation. Crews may be operating in areas that are unfamiliar to them, which is likely to result in slower clearing operations and higher elements of risk.

In anticipation of COVID or related health issues occurring among the work force, an alert system will be put in place during the pandemic. Information will be provided to the public so they can be aware that service levels will be reduced and to what level. There will be three alert levels: a green (green), a yellow (yellow) and a red.

The Green Phase: During this phase, it is anticipated that the Public Works crews can maintain the service levels historically provided and as outlined in the Winter Operations Plan. One or two employees may be out due to short term illness or a truck may be inoperative but generally service levels can be maintained. If a major snow or ice event occurs, there will be delays but those delays will be consistent with how these events were accommodated in the past.

The Yellow Phase: A designation under this phase indicates that operations will be delayed anywhere from 4 to 8 hours due to the unavailability of crews or the severity and duration of the storm event or a combination of both. This would occur approximately when only 75% of the CDL licensed crew is available to man the fleet, including the use of qualified supervisory support personnel, any contractors who may be available, and sharing of equipment and operators between the two communities. Primary routes will attempt to be covered as well as hill sections. Coverage on flat secondary roads and sidewalk coverage will likely be delayed until equipment and personnel can be made available for coverage. Some vehicles may be diverted from normal routes for assist emergency responders. This designation may impact school openings or closings and bus pick-ups, depending upon the severity of the storm and the timing.

The Red Phase: This phase occurs when 50% of the CDL licensed crew or less is available to provide winter services. Road clearing operations will be severely impacted with delays that could last anywhere from 12 to 24 hours. Most of the major truck routes take from 6 to 8 hours to clear in a normal 4 to 6-inch storm event lasting a few hours. Employees cannot plow continuously for extended periods safely. Under this scenario, the delays could be anywhere from 12 to 24 hours and sidewalks may not get started until the storm event is over. This alert level will likely impact school openings or closings and bus pick-ups, depending upon the severity of the storm and the timing.

The alert system does not replace other emergency alert systems/declarations or school decisions regarding opening or closure. The only relevance is to expected road conditions and delays in providing road clearing operations over the period of a winter storm and immediately after the storm. School closures will be determined by the Essex-Westford School District and local businesses.

NOTICE OF THE ALERT SYSTEM: The Town and Village will provide information to the media on the alert status, post the status on the Town/Village web page and notify the Police Department and the Essex Westford School District as to the current Phase of Operations.

Citizens can also call the Town Public Works offices during the normal weekday workweek from 7AM until 4PM for the current phase of operation.

Safety Practices and Procedures to be employed by Public Works Employees are covered in the Winter Operations Plan under a special section included in Appendix 8. Employees must strictly adhere to these practices to help prevent the spread of COVID and the impact it would have on their families and the Community's Winter Plowing operations.