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Clearing the way

They may not always be popular, but the town employees who keep our roads clear of snow are 'unsung heroes' / **Page 3**



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Unsung heroes: Plow drivers keep our roads open

BY HEIDI RIEDNER
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Tuesday night's winter storm meant a snow day Wednesday for many, but that has different meaning for the "unsung heroes" whose job it is to keep the roads open.

Georgina has more good men than you can shake a stick at — and, sometimes, maybe even a few shovels.

Whiteout conditions, massive amounts of snow and the odd frustrated driver or angry shoveller battling the inevitable snow ridge at the end of their driveways are all in a day's work for plow drivers out clearing the town's roadways after a winter wallop.

That day, mind you, often begins at 3:30 a.m., especially in cases where 15 to 25 centimetres have already accumulated, such as Tuesday.

The town's roads department crew, however, takes the literal and figurative storm with a grain of salt — and a whole lot of sand.

As a matter of fact, the town gets "far more compliments and positive feedback via social media from town residents who are pleased with the job that our snow plow operators and other staff do during and immediately following a winter event," says Ken Turrieff, the town's communications manager.

Georgina's road department takes care of 395 municipal roads, clearing 664 kilometres, with a roughly \$1.2 million annual winter maintenance budget.

Depending on the severity of a storm, it can take roads staff eight to 12 hours to make one complete pass of all town roads.

Main arterial roads, such as Woodbine Avenue and Ravenshoe and Old Homestead roads are plowed by York Region, while Hwy. 48 is handled by the provincial Transportation Ministry.

"A lot of people take what we do for granted," explains Scott Edwards, the town's road superintendent, who oversees 14 full-time staff including, foremen at the Belhaven and Egypt yards, as well as two contracted staff and one seasonal patroller.

"Our snow plow drivers are unsung heroes. They go out, they take pride in their jobs and keep it safe for everybody. The reality is, these guys live and have families here, too, and they give their everything to make sure the roads are safe for them and you."

Brandon Winch, one of the town's 10 plow drivers, agrees, as he deftly manoeuvres the latest addition to the fleet — a \$250,000 single rear axle plow rivaling a Star Wars fighter jet with its complex dash and floor instrument panel, rear and underside cameras, running totals of tonnage being put out, front



STAFF PHOTO/HEIDI RIEDNER

Roads department superintendent Scott Edwards, plow operator Brandon Winch and foreman Dennis King were ready to hit, and clear, the streets after Tuesday's storm dumped up to 25 centimetres of snow in Georgina.

plow, belly scraper and side wing extensions — through his south Keswick subdivision route.

"That's what bothers me the most is if people think we're out to get them. I don't want people to think I'm plowing their driveway in for fun. I'm not out there to stress them out or ruin their lives."

He just smiles, nods in agreement and says, "Oh ya" when asked if he's been sworn and yelled at, been flipped the bird or had fists and shovels raised at him as he passes in a loud cloud of moving snow that drivers call boulders.

"You do get the odd frustrated person, but I don't understand people waving their shovels at me like I'm trying to make their life difficult on my dime and my time. I've had it before on a street where people have shovelled their driveways and they see me coming and they're like, 'You're coming now?' I'm not out to get anyone or doing it on purpose. None of us are. We're just trying to do our job and we do care. We're out there to

help them out."

Some things just can't be avoided, like that ridge at the end of your driveway, for example.

Same goes for when, exactly, your street is plowed. Drivers have designated routes that focus on main roads first, such as those with schools and high traffic flow, followed by secondary roads that often include cul de sacs and dead-end streets.

The town's parks and facilities division clears 75 kilometres of sidewalks, as well as parking lots at all town facilities.

As far as mailboxes go, Edwards says with heavy snows, sometimes damage is unavoidable.

"There's a lot of weight coming off the end of the plow and that's what nine times out of 10 can take out a mailbox. If it was hit by a plow, it'd be in the next neighbourhood, not lying beside its post."

Complaints of plow trucks barreling through neighbourhoods, while understandable to Edwards because of the sheer size and

By the numbers

The roads department looks after majority of Georgina's winter maintenance program, which runs Nov. 15 to March 15. The town's parks and facilities division looks after sidewalks and town facility parking lots and walkways.

- total number of winter events in the 2014 / 15 winter season: 52
- total number of winter events thus far in the 2015 / 16 season: 30
- sand / salt used on town roads in 2014: 12,475 tonnes
- sand / salt used on town roads in 2015: 13,690 tonnes

Winter maintenance budget

- 2015 roads: \$1,219,000
- 2016 roads: \$1,286,000
- 2015 sidewalks/parking lots: \$277,500
- 2016 sidewalks/parking lots: \$284,500

Maintenance equipment

- 10 plows (4 tandem / double rear axle and 6 single rear axle), 2 contracted plows, 1 backhoe, 1 grader, 1 gradeall, 3 tractors, 2 street sweepers, 3 pickups with snow blades
- tandem / double rear axle snowplow weight: 15,000 kg empty / 31,500 kg total when loaded with sand and salt
- single rear axle snowplow weight: 11,500 kg empty / 21,000 kg total when loaded with sand and salt
- all town and contracted snowplows equipped with GPS
- all town snowplows use more environmentally friendly bio fuel and emission controls
- parks and facilities division includes 2 supervisors and 10 full-time park attendants that operate sidewalk and parking lot plows
- equipment includes 6 sidewalk plow, 3 pickups with plows; 2 dump trucks with plows and salt spreaders and 1 mini loader with a 12-inch front blade

sound of the distinct deafening roar of snow and machine, are far from factual.

Plows rarely reach a maximum of 25 km/h in subdivisions and 45 km/h on open

See page 11.

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Plows now have GPS technology

From page 3.

stretches of main roads. When in doubt, however, foreman Dennis King says it is an easy confirmation since this is the first year all plows are equipped with GPS technology.

“For us, it’s the best thing going,” he says, adding each truck’s route can be broken down into 30-second increments, mapping where it is, when, what speed it is travelling at, whether the plow is up or down, sander on or off, as well as tracking the material going out.

The technology may lead to residents being able to go online to find “where’s my plow,” but that initiative would still need to go before council for approval.

“It’s something we may be looking at down the road as future potential for residents,” Edwards says.

While some people get to stay home in the face of blizzards, plow operators brave treacherous conditions to keep roads open.

Even the most experienced plow operators will admit, however, that their working conditions are sometimes nerve-wracking.

Winch says motorists passing him aren’t an issue on his route, but it does crop up on rural stretches and main arteries with the inevitable convoy pile-up behind plows.

“It depends on the conditions, but I’d never pass a plow. Roads are icy, slick and snow-covered and you have to think what is coming ahead, which the plow is taking for you. Besides, your vehicle will get pelted with salt and sand. I don’t understand the concept of it. Maybe people are just in a hurry, but the safest place is behind a plow.”

While the region pre-wets roads with brine and uses a higher concentration of salt, the town uses a 90-per-cent sand /10-per-cent salt mixture to help increase vehicle traction.

Last year, it put out 13,690 tonnes, handling 52 “winter events”.

Flash freezes, like the last storm that blew in a few weeks ago, can also get the heart rate going.

“My truck was sliding down a hill and I

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was just trying to put as much sand down as I could to get the truck to grip,” explains Winch. “Eventually it did, but it gets you breathing a little harder.”

“Soft” shoulders also present a hazard, which can “really toss a truck” if plow operators don’t float their wings to prevent digging in.

When not responding to a winter event, staff are deployed to fulfill numerous tasks and duties, including clearing built up snow for improved sightlines and pedestrian and driver safety, pothole filling, steaming (melting of ice and snow) of catch basins and culverts to help avoid flooding, maintaining vehicles and equipment and debris removal (including downed trees and branches).

The biggest challenge moving forward is maintaining that service level in the face of growth, says King.

“As this area explodes within the next five to 10 years, we’re going to have to have more trucks and more drivers to maintain that level of service.”

More growth means more roads, in addition to maintenance and potential upgrading of the existing networks, says Edwards, adding the roads department runs a very smart and lean ship in terms of efficiencies.

“The roads don’t last forever and the whole province is running into that.”

“You have to maintain your road network, otherwise the cost down the road is tenfold,” says King. “The work you do today can save you millions down the road.”

And just in case you were wondering, when operators get home from a shift, they also have to dig out the bottom of their drive-ways.



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