

Snow Removal by Citizen Volunteers in The City of Good Neighbors

Buffalo Bicycle-Pedestrian Advisory Board

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Current Practices

Sidewalks in Buffalo, especially on residential streets, are often incompletely cleared of snow and ice. One possible reason is that some homeowners are unable to do the work (for health or age reasons) and unable to find someone else to do the work (for financial or social isolation reasons). Proposals for sidewalk snow removal by the City have been considered, but these will take some time to reach full operation and they are likely to focus primarily on commercial streets. At the same time, a number of citizen volunteer efforts have sprung up in recent years, focusing on residential streets. Some groups have come forward for a single event, such as bus stop clearing last year, an East Side coalition during the Christmas blizzard of 2022, and this year's Snow Roll by cyclists with shovels. Some groups continue over the season, such as the Parkside Community Association's Snow Angels program. Informal block club arrangements, such as the partner system of the Lancaster Melbourne block club, are limited in scope to a small area. The Mutual Aid Network's Snow Brigade extends throughout Buffalo and beyond. A list of community-led efforts with contact information is attached.

A more fully developed citywide program for sidewalk snow removal by citizen volunteers can ensure better safety condition for residents, their neighbors, and those who serve them, such as postal and package delivery services, fire fighters, and police officers. A safer and more cohesive community will be the results.

Current Challenges

- Funding. There is no consistent mechanism to pay for materials, equipment, labor, internal communication, publicity, and administrative staff. [The same people who cannot do their own shoveling are often the ones on fixed incomes who cannot afford to pay someone else to do it.]
- Insurance. Liability is covered by homeowner insurance for most, but not all.
- Coordination. There is no central clearinghouse among the numerous groups that have arisen, with only partial communication and coordination among them. A single contact form is needed to receive requests from volunteers and from those in need. Overlap in areas of coverage could be avoided by a central coordinator.
- Consistency. Eligibility for services and criteria for volunteering have not been clearly or consistently stated among the various informal groups that currently exist.
- Areas of Coverage. There are gaps, notably residences on commercial/mixed streets and bus stops/shelters citywide.
- Shortage of volunteers. Requests for assistance tend to be greater than can be served by the small pool of volunteers

Case Studies from Other Cities

A quick Internet search reveals numerous places across the U.S. and Canada with volunteer programs, as described on government websites and in local media. Programs reviewed include Denver, Detroit, Fort Collins, New York City, Ottawa, South Portland (OR), Toledo, Vancouver (CA), and West Allis (WI).

Many programs are publicized on city websites and sponsored by a city department. Some also include links to community organizations. Volunteers are sometimes paid, but usually unpaid. Eligibility is typically limited to seniors, disabled persons, those who are physically unable to clear their own snow, and those with limited income to hire paid help. It appears that the honor system is used, i.e., self report. An online request form and/or the 311 helpline are used to register.

Recommendations

- Funding. Common Council members could use discretionary funds to assist efforts in their districts. A citywide fund could be established, either from a budget line or by combining voluntary contributions from those councilmembers who wish to participate. The NFTA could be encouraged to assist with funding for clearance of bus stops/shelters so that transit employees are not forced to let riders off on the streets.
- Insurance. For properties that do not have their own coverage, the City could cover the cost.
- Coordination. A city department could be designated to coordinate neighborhood efforts, communicate among them, organize a monthly meeting during snow season, and provide guidance for new groups wishing to start such a program. The City could follow the model of many other localities, placing a request form on its website and/or referring to 311. Coordination could be done with the Urban Planning Department at UB or any local college to create an internship for this project for any student wanting to learn/get started in government and/or urban planning. Currently the coordinator at the Buffalo Snow Brigade is a 1-year part time internship and during the winter months it is more than a part time job.
- Consistency. The City could issue a list of suggested eligibility guidelines for recipients and volunteers.
- Areas of Coverage. A citywide coordinated program would be limited to the boundaries of Buffalo. It would also avoid overlap or duplication of efforts in different districts.
- Shortage of volunteers. An aggressive campaign led by the City could recruit more volunteers. A mechanism to pay shovelers (optional) would also draw more interest. Or in lieu of payment, offer community service credit could be offered to [high] school children who volunteer.