

Pierce County Snow Removal - Frequently Asked Questions

Chad Johnson, Pierce County Highway Commissioner
Al Thoner, Patrol Superintendent

There was significant amount of snow in early 2011. What is the status of the winter maintenance portion of the highway department's budget?

The highway department has expended 69% of the 2011 winter maintenance labor and equipment budget (the budget coincides with the calendar year). Ideally, it would be at 50 to 60%, or less. Some tough decisions may have to be made that will impact the traveling public, depending on the severity of the season. The plan is to start the season with our normal operations, but we may have to scale back some combination of early morning call-outs, evening plowing and weekend plowing to defray expenses as the winter season progresses. We will maintain county highways as required by state statutes.

Why don't the plows run all night?

For county highways, the Pierce County Highway Department follows the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (DOT) policy for the state highways in Pierce County, for which the department does the plowing and maintenance. The state highways are Category V (five), or "18-hour" roads. Plowing and maintenance are restricted to the hours of 4 am to 10 pm. For numerous reasons, including resources and safety to the public and workers, there is no activity between 10 pm and 4 am, except as authorized by the DOT.

How do the plows know when to go out?

Beginning after Thanksgiving, weather depending, the highway department has two night maintenance personnel that monitor road and weather conditions, each with a separate shift. The two night shifts span from 3 pm to 6 am, providing 24-hour coverage for the roads beginning Sunday night and ending Friday night. Each weekend, a manager is on call. Much of the road information during off-hours is provided to the highway department from the sheriff's department, which has vehicles traveling throughout the county. Based on current conditions and forecasts, maintainers are dispatched from the Ellsworth and five outlying shops to respective state and county beats.

If the plows are out, why is there snow accumulating on the roadways?

In a normal winter event, it will take a maintainer three hours to complete a round on the state beat (average 25 miles, or 50 lane-miles) and four hours on the county (average 44 miles, or 88 lane-miles). A heavy event will require more time, so if a storm is dumping an inch an hour, there will be noticeable accumulation before a maintainer gets back to that location.

Why is there a difference in the road conditions at county lines?

Again this relates to the amount of time it takes a maintainer to make a round, and where the county line falls on his beat. For example, if St. Croix and Pierce Counties both begin plowing at 5am, Pierce will

hit the county line on USH 63 north of the Red Barn at approximately 5:15 am, while St. Croix will be there at about 6:15 am.

What is the department's mailbox policy?

If a mailbox is dislodged or knocked down by the force of snow or slush thrown off the plow or wing, repair is the responsibility of the owner. If there is evidence that the plow or wing actually struck the box or post, a representative from the highway department will inspect the mailbox and replacement costs, as approved by the insurance company, will be assumed by the county. If a mailbox is found to be non-conforming the owner may be liable to others for personal injury or property damage, according to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation.

Why does the county use sand instead of salt?

The sand that is used to increase roadway abrasion is actually salt-sand, a mixture of five percent salt mixed with screened sand that the county produces at the Stogdill Pit in the Town of Trenton. The cost of salt-sand is around \$15 per ton, as opposed to around \$63 per ton for straight salt. In certain situations, straight salt is used. Also, in advance of freezing rain or similar conditions, a liquid anti-icing agent is applied in strategic locations such as hills and bridge decks.

How much distance should a vehicle stay behind a snow plow?

Snow discharged from a plow can create a cloud that limits visibility. A snow plow is considered an emergency vehicle that, by law, should not be followed closer than 500 feet. If the lights of the plow are not flashing and snow is not causing a visibility problem, 200 feet should be allowed.

Do you have any other winter driving advice?

Clear frost and snow completely from windshields prior to driving, and refrain from using cruise control during inclement weather. Conditions vary on the roadway due to many factors, including terrain, roadway shading, wind and temperature. Also, remain vigilant about differing road conditions and limit non-essential travel during winter storms. Remember that posted speed limits are for dry pavement. Most winter driving accidents are caused by driving too fast. For road condition information, do not call the Sheriff's department, but rather go to www.511wi.gov/web/ or call 511. Finally, the DOT maintenance manual states:

“The goal of winter maintenance is to make roadways safe within the limitations of resources, roadway protection and environmental concerns. Hence, motorists can expect some inconvenience and will be expected to modify their driving practices to adapt to road conditions.”