Pierce County Winter Maintenance - Frequently Asked Questions - 2019

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 or emergency situations such as freezing rain.

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 a 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 a particular location. Also, depending on the type of snow, windy conditions may create drifting. During heavy events two trucks may be added for a total of 15 trucks performing maintenance on the State and County systems. Also be aware that climbing lanes and turn lanes are lower priority than mainline and therefore may have additional accumulation on them.

Why is sand used on the County Highway System?

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 25% of straight salt and provides a significant reduction to salt pollution in area waterways. In certain situations, straight salt is used. Also, in advance of freezing rain or similar conditions, salt brine is applied via spray bar in strategic locations such as hills and bridge decks (you will notice a striped pattern on the pavement). It is also added to the dry material applied by maintenance trucks to accelerate softening of ice and to reduce bounce and scatter. Brine storage tanks at each outlying shop allow increased brine usage in the county.
If there is rain on my windshield, can I assume the roads are fine because they are just wet?

No. The upper air temperature, air temperature and pavement temperature may all be different. Any rain that falls when the air temperature is below 36 degrees F should be treated very cautiously, as it could easily be freezing on the pavement.

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

Some of this relates to the amount of time it takes a maintainer to make a round, and where the county line falls on their beat. For example, if St. Croix and Pierce Counties both begin plowing at 4am, Pierce will hit the county line on USH 63 north of the Red Barn at approximately 4:15 am, while St. Croix will be there at about 5:15 am. Counties may also elect to use straight salt on some of their County roads, where Pierce County predominantly uses salt-sand.

States may have different levels of service on the same roadway. USH 10 in Minnesota has 24-hour coverage from MN DOT, versus the 18-hour coverage permitted in Pierce County. Other area 24-hour roads include I-94, and STH 35 from River Falls to Hudson.

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.

What distance should a vehicle stay behind a snow plow?

Snow discharged from a plow can create a cloud that limits visibility. A snow plow engaged in winter maintenance has a minimum following distance dictated in State Statute 346.915. Those distances are 200 feet on roads with a speed limit greater than 35 mph, and 75 feet on roads with a speed limit of 35 mph or less. Additionally, be aware maintenance trucks may be backing at intersections while performing snow removal. Remember, if you cannot see the mirrors of the truck or the operator’s head, they cannot see you.

What should I do if I meet a plow going the opposite direction?

The plow operator may be trying to clear the centerline which is allowable under State Statute 346.05(2). Slowly move towards your right shoulder to allow the plow operator room. Do not crowd the centerline.
Can I pass a snowplow?

Passing a snowplow is not illegal but should be done with extra care. You are taking a risk in not knowing the roadway conditions ahead of the plow. Passing a snowplow on the right in a dedicated climbing lane while the plow is in the left lane is especially dangerous. The plow driver likely will have their wing down, which will protrude into the climbing lane and be minimally visible depending on the amount of snow being plowed.

Does pavement age affect driving conditions?

Yes. Newer pavement will become slippery faster during wet snow, rain or freezing rain events because it is less abrasive. New pavements in the county for 2019 include CTH FF from CTH F to STH 29, CTH DD from USH 10 to STH 72, CTH J from USH 10 to STH 65, CTH D from STH 35 to USH 10 and STH 35 from USH 63 to south of Prescott along with various town roads. An advantage to newer pavement with respect to winter maintenance is that snow and ice clean off easier. New pavement is also darker and will clear off quicker in sunny conditions.

Is the County responsible for the windrow left at the end of my driveway after plowing operations?

No. Please see the document “Keeping your driveway clear” on the Pierce County website at http://www.co.pierce.wi.us/Highway/PDF%20Files/Keeping_Driveway_Clear.pdf to see how you can minimize windrowing on your driveway from highway operations. Also note that State Statutes 86.01, 86.07 and 346.94 address the prohibition of leaving windrows or piles in the traveled portion of any highway. You will be liable for a crash or damage to vehicles if it is determined the cause was snow left on the highway from your driveway clearing (see State Statute 941.03). Please relay this information to anyone performing contracted snow removal services at your home or business.

Do you have any other winter driving advice?

The Highway and Sheriff’s Departments work closely year around, especially in the winter, and offer the following tips:

When traveling during winter weather; clear frost and snow completely from windshields prior to driving, allow extra travel time, maintain safe braking distances between you and the vehicles ahead of you and refrain from using cruise control. Conditions vary on the roadway due to many factors, including terrain, roadway shading, wind and temperature, so remain vigilant about differing road conditions and limit non-essential travel during winter storms. Examine your vehicles tires (a minimum of 2/32” tread is required by state law). Remember that posted speed limits are for dry pavement. Most winter driving accidents are caused by driving too fast and following too closely. For road
condition information, do not call the Sheriff’s department, but rather go to [www.511wi.gov/web](http://www.511wi.gov/web) or call 511. Finally, the DOT maintenance manual states:

“For over 90 years, Wisconsin’s primary mission for winter highway maintenance has been to improve the coefficient of friction between motor vehicle tires and the pavement. To accomplish this mission it is not necessary to completely remove or melt all of the snow or ice.”