

Ice, Snow & the Jefferson County Road Crew

(Originally printed by former Commissioner Obie, edited and reprinted 2017) Ice and snow have already become an issue for county road crews as they work to keep roads passable and safe. Our crews sometimes hear a lot of criticism but, all things considered, they do a fine job keeping up with multiple demands. Since winter weather has already impacted parts of the county, I thought it might be worthwhile to have an overview of the road crew operation and some of the policies it adheres to during the winter season.

We have a total of seven crewmembers; two in Whitehall/Cardwell, two in Boulder/Basin, and three in Jefferson City/Clancy/Montana City. They are responsible for over 700 miles of county and county-maintained roads. Our crews attempt to cover the bus routes first thing each morning, before 7:30 AM when the buses run. If an accident has occurred the Highway Patrol or Sheriff may call one of our crew off the regular route to the accident site and we are obligated to respond. If one of our plow trucks is broken down or in for maintenance the driver may get a late start. If the roads are exceptionally bad or if it is snowing and visibility is poor, the routes take longer to cover. If a crewmember is sick or on vacation or our crew falls behind schedule there are no additional people to call or add.

Our crewmembers work a 40-hour workweek from Monday through Friday. They are dedicated, hardworking individuals who do their best to meet the needs of the people. Generally, when problems occur on the weekends or on holidays, one of the crewmembers is willing to come out to sand or plow when called. However, this is a voluntary decision on their part. They are not required to respond. When we call someone out at night, on the weekend, or on a holiday, we pay them overtime pay at “time and a half” for a minimum of four hours.

To cover all our plow routes after a heavy snowfall takes up to three days. Side roads and “feeders” are simply not a priority. Only main routes or “collectors” will be plowed during the first day. If snow continues to fall during this time, the main routes are re-plowed before the side roads and feeders.

One frequent concern is ice: especially on the steep, chip-sealed roads into some of the large subdivision. We do attempt to sand icy roads when possible. However, sanding is not a given. Many counties do not provide any sanding. It might be of interest for some to know that the county does not maintain most subdivision roads. Except in the case of the older subdivisions where roads were accepted long ago, the maintenance of roads in subdivisions is the responsibility of the homeowners.

We attempt every day to respond quickly and cordially to problem areas and, overall, to provide for a safe transportation network in the county. But our crews cannot be everywhere all the time. That’s where you can help. Prepare yourself and your family for roads that are not city streets nor always maintained. Be sure you have good snow tires and/or chains. If you live in the hills or more than a quarter mile off the collector route, a four-wheel-drive vehicle may be your best option. Homeowners on side roads in subdivision should consider pooling resources to have a snowplow equipped tractor or pick-up for clearing approaches, driveways and side roads in case of heavy snow. And, as always, drive for the road conditions and be prepared for changing road conditions: this entails slowing down, being aware of your surroundings, and being courteous to other drivers.

We have established a delicate balance of human and mechanical resources to get the best coverage possible. Every element: an added fence, a new approach, an overhanging tree, alters the timing and effectiveness on the winter maintenance route.

You pay about \$20.93 in taxes to the road department for every \$100,000 in property you own. Additional funds come to the road department through the gas tax refund from the State and through PILT (payment in lieu of taxes) funds from the federal government. Never the less, the entire road department budget is about \$1,492,783, considering the amount of expenses coming from that budget, equipment/vehicle maintenance, equipment parts, equipment purchases, and operational costs (sand, fuel, personnel, etc.), this does not equate to a lot of funds for such a large county.

I hope this information contributes to your understanding of our operation and why we have some of the policies we do. If you have any questions or suggestions you are welcome to call any of the commissioners at 225-4025.