

On Pedestrian Safety and Snow Removal

An Opinion Piece by

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Lest anyone think this is a cheap shot in reaction to the recent snow, be assured that I have been expressing these views for some time now, including during the hearings held by the County Council a year or so ago regarding Mr. Andrews' law concerning the shoveling of sidewalks. I'm all in favor of shoveling sidewalks: my wife and I did so at least twice during the recent storm, but gave up when DPWT (or SHA - we live on University Blvd. W. so the real perpetrators are always the other guy!) plowed us under. The last storm was like the seven-year locust: very unusual but it served to highlight some fundamental problems. We need to get our priorities in order and we need to elect and support public officials who say what they mean, mean what they say, and put their words into action.

There is NO way that Montgomery County (or the State of Maryland for that matter) can handle the kind of snowstorm we just experienced smoothly enough to please everyone. In fact, we really can't expect to please everyone with the handling of even the puny little snows we routinely get around here. But we should - and CAN - do better, IF we reassess our priorities and define new paradigms. Let me start. Pedestrian safety is at least as important as driver safety. Everyone agree? Pedestrian safety is MORE important than driver convenience. Still on board? Let's assume so. Then what is the logic of plowing streets so that main roads are clear but side roads are not and sidewalks are under all/most of the snow that was plowed off the roads? Who are we kidding? Unless we invest money (more \$\$ than anyone really believes we can/should spend) in equipment to haul snow away (and/or melt it where it is plowed), something has to give. I maintain that we MUST do more to help pedestrians, even if that means doing less to help motorists. Let me make a few suggestions, but first let me point out some obvious points: (a) with some exceptions we are all both pedestrians and motorists; (b) buses function as vehicles but require the kind of support that we normally think of as needed by pedestrians; (c) clogged sidewalks are a strain on all who shovel, not just the elderly or infirm; (d) being forced to walk in the street (especially one that is a state road carrying hundreds of wild-eyed drivers frustrated by delays) is not healthy for anyone, including the schoolkids for whose safety our elected officials have expressed such pious concern; and (e) if smart growth (choose your own flavor) means anything, then the extra density we create near urban districts and Metro stations ought to come with easier access for pedestrians and via mass transit.

With the above in mind, here are a few suggestions about what we should do with regard to clearing the snow in the future. Feel free to shoot any one (or all) of these down, but we MUST come up with better ways to do things and we cannot rely on our "leaders" to come up with solutions.

1. I believe our highest priority should be to clear snow so that all segments of the moving public regain mobility at comparable rates. That means that clearing

sidewalks, main roads and neighborhood streets should have equal priority and than NONE of the above should have higher priority than another. That is, we should NOT clear snow from main roads in such a fashion as to make the use of sidewalks or sidestreets harder.

2. If the last week or so has forced us all to RE-learn anything, it is that it is better to at least be able to walk to a local store than to have to sit in traffic for hours trying to drive to a store that is within walking distance.

3. At present we are using the old model of clearing most main roads as much and as fast as possible, by plowing snow to the right side of the road. I suggest that we seriously consider, in many situations, plowing towards the median and, if necessary, NOT plowing the left hand lane of multi-lane roads. Plow the snow at intersections back onto the median. This strategy would leave the right hand lane open, which would keep bus-stops accessible and would encourage people to shovel sidewalks, because the shoveling would not be quickly undone by the plowing of the roads. It would also keep access to sidestreets as open as possible.

4. Plowing to the middle of sidestreets will, in most cases NOT work, so I am NOT suggesting that item 3 is the ONE solution. I suggest that we continue to plow to the right on side streets and that we NOT plow multiple lanes on main roads until at least one lane has been plowed on sidestreets.

5. Since our capacity to remove snow is limited, I suggest that we officially recognize that, after major storms, in some locations (urban districts, near Metro stations) it is MORE important to clear sidewalks than to clear streets. Yes - I mean we should clear some sidewalks BEFORE we clear the adjacent roads. As someone who has lived through major storms in New York City and in Chicago, I know for sure that it is easier to walk a few blocks than to drive the same distance in the first few days after a major storm. I'd rather walk on the sidewalk, than on a partially cleared road but, as we all know, people WILL walk on the partially cleared road even if they have to fight traffic to do so.

6. I realize that what I've suggested would require reconfiguring many snowplows, not to mention the minds of many of our leaders and those who run DPWT and SHA. So what? We pay for the equipment and the salaries, so we have the right to demand changes when the status quo isn't working.

OK, enough. You get the point. Bottom line: if we really are concerned about pedestrian safety and mass transit after snowstorms, we MUST rethink our priorities. Clearing roads can no longer be our highest priority. High? Yes. Highest? NO!

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