

County readies for Mother Nature's Winter Fury

Claim's to be in a better position for a rough winter following last year's record snowfalls

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In preparation for winter's wonders, Montgomery County's snow-removal plans have been outfitted with some major policy changes to keep roads open and residents satisfied, according to Keith Compton, the county's chief of highway services.

After digging residents out of the snow in non-record-breaking fashion last winter, county officials found themselves still digging out of a hole stockpiled with concerned residents.

Last Wednesday, Compton faced residents who expressed their concerns with the efficiency of the county's plowing operations, as a result of being stuck indoors for weeks due to unplowed streets during last year's record snowfalls. The discussion took place at a snow-removal forum at the Eastern Montgomery Regional Services Center, which was organized by Councilwoman Nancy Navarro.

"Many believed that their streets were the last to be plowed, and others expressed concerns about coordination with utility companies," Navarro said on the county's website.

According to Compton, Montgomery County received mixed feedback from residents last winter, and there was a fair amount of complaints, mainly from those residents who were trapped in their house with no power. Receiving negative feedback is just the nature of dealing with such harsh weather conditions, he noted.

This winter, Compton said the department is ready for the harshest weather.

"We've been planning all season for the upcoming winter road operations," Compton said. "We're ready for whatever Mother Nature has to bring our way, and hopefully, she won't throw any surprises like she did last year."

Winter storm-planning is year-round, Compton said.

The Department of Transportation began its policy reform process as early March and then unveiled the complete revamped set of initiatives on Nov. 4, at the annual Snow Summit, according to Compton.

One of the new initiatives Compton mentioned was the expansion of the residential snow routes, which went from 160 to 220 routes, and more crew members will be added to each route. Under the new plowing plan, all of the county's nearly one million residents will be within a half-mile of a plowed road within a certain window of time following the passing of a storm, Compton said.

"The reason we expanded the plow routes is for more frequency in reporting information back to the public, to keep the public more informed, as well as to increase the number of pieces of equipment that engage upon the residential sector at any given time," Compton said.

This winter, the county will be piloting an Automatic Vehicle Locator system, which is a portable global positioning system to help navigate new or unfamiliar routes, according to Compton.

“A system like that comes out of the box at \$1 million, and we are not ready to take a million-dollar plunge into anything,” Compton said “So we are going to outfit about five pieces of equipment with AVL technology; we will take a close look at it this winter, and we will make a decision about implementing it.”

On Nov. 3, the county held a mock snowstorm as a training exercise to ensure all the county personnel know their jobs and all the equipment is running properly. The mock operation simulated a six-inch snow storm and all of the crews are dispatched to their plow routes, according to Compton. Additionally, all the electronics were tested for proper functioning.

“It was very uneventful, meaning everything went well,” Compton said.

Select county vehicles and roads were fitted with sensors this year to monitor weather conditions; these devices, along with close monitoring of national weather patterns, will be implemented to give plows and salt trucks detailed information on storms and frozen roadways, Compton said.

Last winter, the Department of Transportation spent approximately \$55 million and used more than 60,000 tons of salt and sand on snow removal, according to Compton.

The Department of Transportation has a systematic method, titled the “Winter Weather Operations” for clearing 5,082 miles of county-maintained roadways when it begins to snow, according to the county’s website. A crew of 200 county employees spreads salt on all main roads and emergency routes when snowfall begins; plowing does not begin until the snow reaches a height of three inches on the roadways, according to the county’s website. The crews work around the clock, Compton said.

When snow removal crews are in operation, anyone can view the current status of roads and the progress of the crews on the Montgomery County website. For further information, contact the Montgomery County Department of Transportation at 240-777-7623.