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Montgomery snow removal costs expected to top \$60M

Council asks questions on blizzard response during session with county officials, Pepco

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

Montgomery County officials expect to spend about \$60 million on snow removal this season — with \$40 million of that the result of back-to-back blizzards in February that dumped nearly 4 feet of snow.

The cost of cleanup, including removal of debris and repairing potholes, has not been included in that amount, said Arthur Holmes, director of the county's Department of Transportation. Only snow plowing and other initial removal costs were known at this time, he said.

Holmes told the Montgomery County Council during a briefing Tuesday that the total cost of the storms would not be known until after the lengthy cleanup process was complete.

Council members asked questions of county officials, representatives of Pepco and others — keeping to a script. Each council member asked several questions that they were assigned from a prepared list of 26 questions, which they received from residents.

Keith Compton, chief of the county's division of highway services, said he wanted to show the council — and the public — a PowerPoint presentation Tuesday, but was "prohibited from doing so" by council staff.

Council President Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park said the decision was in the interest of time. The council wanted time to ask as many questions as possible, she said.

Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park suggested that he have county officials post the presentation on the county Web site.

Council members praised county officials and Pepco workers for their efforts during the storms.

Council Vice President Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring called the response "extraordinary."

Floreen said employees, contractors and others put forth a "remarkable" effort before, during and after the storms.

Compton supplied council members with binders filled with e-mailed compliments from constituents over the county's snow removal.

During the briefing, Cris Voss, of the county's Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security, said 25 percent of the county lost power during the two blizzards.

"I think Pepco did its best to turn the lights back on," Floreen said.

Council members said they received similar complaints during the February storms that they did during a December storm, including concerns about delays in plowing neighborhood streets and a policy that neighborhood streets not be cleared to bare pavement.

Compton said that often residents don't see bare pavement on their streets and believe their street has been overlooked.

Councilman Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac said there were concerns that some county roads were not on the county's computer system — and therefore were not plowed.

Compton said the county is looking into purchasing a new, better system for tracking which county roads have been cleared of snow. He said officials will be attending April's North America Snow Conference held in Nebraska.

The event, hosted by the American Public Works Association, offers ideas for snow maintenance, according to the association's Web site.