

# Riding in a plow demonstrates the difficulty of not berming

By Kathryn Reed

I'm a complainer. And I admitted this trait to a plow driver. And then to his boss.

They are used to my type.

I hate the berm. I don't see why they have to happen. Must be a lazy plow driver is my thinking.



Bobby Maxwell convinces one South Tahoe resident berms are part of life.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

That was my philosophy before spending a couple hours in the cramped cockpit of one of those monsters.

Still hate berms, but I understand why they happen. You couldn't be lazy and have this job.

In fact, I'm guessing most people could never do this job. I know I'm going to stick with a keyboard to show off my dexterity and a computer to show how good I am with heavy

equipment.

Stepping into the big blue rig belonging to South Lake Tahoe on the night of Feb. 17 I didn't know what I was in for. Public Works Director John Greenhut invited me for a ride-along after I complained in late December about all the side streets along Tahoe Keys Boulevard being bermed. (In years past I've whined about berms at the foot of my driveway. My excuse for complaining is some storms I get berms, some I don't.)

Bobby Maxwell took me under his wing, almost literally based on how cramped the snowplow is, to educate me a bit. At 26, he has been plowing the streets of South Lake Tahoe for six years.

He, and later his boss Azril Kalik, explained the berms on Keys Boulevard had to do with a sander helping clear the road. It only has a front plow, no gate. Without a gate, a berm is definitely going to happen.

I honestly thought being a snowplow driver was no big deal. Oh, how wrong I was.

Now I want to leave them beer or cookies like I do the mail carrier and garbage guys at the holidays.

Maxwell says they aren't allowed to take any kind of gratuity. I don't want to get anyone in trouble, but I think I'm going to see if that's just the company line. Good, hard work deserves something extra.

This isn't to say I'm not going to have a potty mouth (under my breath) when a berm full of chunks of ice requiring someone of Arnold Schwarzenegger's stature to clear them is left at the foot of my driveway.

I'm not that easily convinced it's all about the snow conditions and quantity of it. Yes, I understand those are

legitimate reasons, but I know some of the guys are just better than others.

But Maxwell repeatedly demonstrated the gate can only do so much. It's there to reduce a berm, not eliminate it.

It's a thankless job. It's long hours of staring out a window for 12 hours with blinding snow.

No breaks. No bathroom. No one to shoot the breeze with.

Maxwell might spend five minutes eating something he brought with him. Even cops take dinner breaks. And those guys are often chattering on their cell phones. Plow drivers don't have these perks, so to speak.

This South Tahoe High grad is happy to have the job and likes it on most nights. But he admits it can be a drain. But he knows he is providing a vital service and takes pride in what he is doing.

Meticulous snowplowing might be possible to define based on industry standards, but the public is not apt to buy into it. They want cleared streets no matter the condition. They don't want berms. They want to turn left even when the left turn lane is gone.

But this is snow country. It's about dealing with forces that are beyond all of our control.

One thing I can control, though, is patience. I need to learn to have more of it.

I have a respect for these guys in their blue contraptions that I never had before. Now I'll wave to them with all of my fingers.