

Snow removal expectations, reality differ

By Kathryn Reed

When it comes to snow removal, South Lake Tahoe and El Dorado County officials are defensive and bristle with the barrage of criticism.

They point to the amount of snow – several feet in consecutive days – as being a literal barrier to being able to clear streets.

Those who have lived in the basin for a short time seem to complain the most. They have cleared their property and now expect the public right-of-ways to be snow-free zones.

Those who have been here more than a decade have a bit more tolerance. Some remember a time when businesses were mom and pop operations, nothing corporate. Residents didn't go to work because the boss couldn't make it either, nor could any potential customers. It's not that way today. People don't

expect commerce to sti



South Lake Tahoe equipment

- 12 graders; 8 are used during a 12-hour shift, while 4 are backups
 - 2 sander plow trucks that are primarily used at the beginning of the storm
 - 7 blowers; 6 are active and 1 is a 1960 machine with a blown engine
- "During a 12-hour shift, and we do two per 24-hour day, we have eight grader operators, two plow truck operators, one manager, and two or three mechanics on duty. Same for the next shift. We are fully staffed. This has been the same number of plow operators for many years. Nothing has changed in the labor numbers or the patterns or the methods. We are short on mechanics, but that is being taken care of." – **Jim Marino**, *South Lake Tahoe public works deputy director*

El Dorado County equipment in Meyers

- 9 graders, plus 1 backup
 - 7 rotaries, no backup
 - 2 loaders
 - 2 sand trucks
- "Most graders are 11 years old. In the past we replaced them every seven years when possible. We have five rotaries from the 1970s one from the 1980s and one brand new one that was delivered in 2016."
- **Brad Lower**, *director of El Dorado County's transportation division*

El Dorado County equipment in Tahoma

- 2 graders, no backup
 - 2 rotaries, no backup
 - 1 loader
 - 1 sand truck
- "The graders at this location are only a couple of years old and our rotaries are from 1994 and 2003." – **Brad Lower**, *director of El Dorado County's transportation division*

The city and county in large part are operating with decades-old equipment. This has a lot to do with voters not upping the snow removal tax and the jurisdictions then not putting together a fleet replacement plan in time to deal with the problem. Tahoma residents voted to pay \$50 a year. South Lake Tahoe and El Dorado County South Shore property owners pay \$20/year.

South Lake Tahoe sends a mechanic out to a broken down apparatus. It's fixed in the street, not back at the shop. It's faster, but clearly not ideal working conditions. The county mechanics are based in Meyers; one of the four is out.

Bard Lower, director of El Dorado County's transportation

division, told *Lake Tahoe News*, “Our crews have been working seven days a week 24 hours a day since the New Year without a break.”

Experience driving the plows makes a difference, too. Two-thirds of the city’s crew has five or more years’ experience plowing with graders. The remaining third is new. The county drivers based in Meyers have an average of 14 years of snow removal experience.

(This is **a story** about a snowplow ride-along this reporter did in 2011 that explains what it is like to do that job.)

Both agencies say they provide better service than the other. That internal bravado is not carrying over into reality, at least with some residents. This is Day 4 since there has been any substantial snow and yet some neighborhoods are still a mess.

“This is the worst year in my 50-year history for snow removal from our roads. What changed? Places like Angora Highlands and Echo View Estate have yet to see a rotary plow – this is at 1:30 on Thursday. This is extremely substandard,” one resident wrote to *Lake Tahoe News*.

Lake Tahoe Unified School District called a snow day on Tuesday because officials said the roads were impassable for buses.

Yet, fire trucks that are 38-feet-long were going down those same roads.



Some South Shore residents have little tolerance for narrow streets. Photo/LTN

Issues continued for school bus drivers on Wednesday.

“A couple of buses did get stuck in neighborhoods where they couldn’t clear the turns on the roads. There were some minor delays in dropping students at school, but no damage to buses, and no accidents,” Shannon Chandler, spokeswoman for LTUSD, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Years ago the district used main bus routes when side streets were not plowed. Not so anymore. No explanation was provided by the district why this no longer occurs. (When LTUSD has at least three snow days it applies for a waiver from the state Department of Education to not have to have the maximum days of instruction.)

The county says school bus routes are a priority after main routes like Pioneer Trail and Upper Truckee Road are plowed.

The city doesn't factor in school bus routes in its prioritization.

"Our guys have been going 24/7 since Dec. 28 and in that time have only had three days off. We experienced mechanical issues with the plows, downed trees, power lines, grader diversions to accident scenes for fire and police, and a gazillion cars abandoned in roadways all compounding a long duration storm. Couple that with the 'instant gratification need' of some of our population and we have trouble satisfying," South Lake Tahoe Deputy Public Works Director Jim Marino told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The county has the same obstacles.



Gates are not dropped on snowplows when a driveway is not cleared. Photo/LTN

“Each of these items add significantly to the time required to clear not only the street, but those around them. For example, county staff has to wait to remove snow from streets until power lines have been removed for safety reasons and in an effort not to destroy the infrastructure of the power provider,” Lower said.

Both agencies say plows have now hit every street at least once. Still, many are narrow, requiring cars to stop in order to have oncoming traffic pass.

The city used to have a GPS system where the public could track the plows. It didn't work as expected and therefore was discontinued. If better technology presents itself, the idea might be revisited.

The county's Meyers office is responsible for snow removal down to Strawberry. A separate group handles Tahoma.

Much contention in all jurisdictions surrounds the use of the gate on plows. The irony is the gate was created years ago by a South Lake Tahoe employee who then sold the concept to a snowplow manufacturer. Now those gates are the norm.

“If you watch our operators, you will see that they lower the gate when they can see they are going to pass a driveway. If there are only a few inches of snow the snow will be moved beyond the driveway – no berm. However, if there is more than 6 to 8 inches of snow, even with the gate down, snow will boil over the gate and is left in the adjacent driveway,” Lower said. “With the amount of snow we've had recently, graders can no longer move the snow effectively and our crews are using blowers to open up the road. A blower generally leaves a fairly straight line along the edge of the road and leaves little or no berm.”

Marino said, “I can honestly say our guys really do try and minimize problems for properties as much as we can, but this storm gave us no respite, we simply did not have a long enough

break between snowfall to break out the blowers and widen.”