

Hall, Renee

From: Kyle Poorman <kylepoorman@mac.com>
Sent: Tuesday, August 13, 2024 6:11 PM
To: Clausen, Justin; City Council and Mayor; Schainker, Steve; Joiner, John
Subject: Re: Email to City Council from January 19, 2024

[External Email]

Hello Ames City Leadership,

It has taken me some months to collect my thoughts and provide a productive response to the email I received from Justin Clausen in the winter.

I will suggest a number of steps to move forward on ensuring that our sidewalk network is useable for all individuals in the wintertime. Ames residents, especially those with mobility challenges, should not have to wait weeks for our sidewalk network to be reliably available in the winter months. I will also reiterate the issues that I view as troublesome and limiting.

First of all, I would like to reiterate that Ames has an ordinance that calls for the removal of snow off of the sidewalk network within 10 daylight hours of the cessation of the storm. The spirit of this ordinance is to ensure that the sidewalk network is open and available almost immediately. I would say that this 10 daylight hour ordinance is followed by most private citizens and businesses. There is however a significant issue with any sidewalk that crosses the road. To move anywhere in the city, one must be able to reliably cross roads. At the boundary of private and public space, a gray area occurs and responsibility for moving the snow is not clear. This gray area occurs at or near every curb. The gray area, that I will call the sidewalk boundary, is typically in the road itself or in the city right-of-way. This gray area means that snow accumulates at the sidewalk boundary and makes it incredibly treacherous to use the sidewalk network for weeks after larger accumulations or multiple smaller accumulations of snow. I have used see-click-fix to document this in the Old Town area of Ames. This is not a unique issue for Old Town, but rather illustrative of a city that does not have a reliable sidewalk network for weeks after larger accumulations of snow. In the previous email sent to me by Justin Clausen, he attributed this to a 'historic storm.' There may have been a 'historic' storm last January, but this issue occurs every winter where there are typical accumulations of snow. I would also like to point out about the set of storms in January, the sidewalk boundaries were still problematic around the city until we had unseasonably warm weather that melted snow in February. I vehemently complained about areas in Old Town and the city dispatched crews to only the areas that I complained about 16 to 18 days after the initial snow. I typically don't complain until 10 days after a snow event, even though I think sidewalks should be usable much sooner than 240 hours after the cessation of snow.

Solutions:

1. Clearly delineate responsibility for the sidewalk boundary and communicate that to the general public effectively. I ask that the Council clearly ascribe who holds the ultimately responsible for the gray area and communicate that responsibility. If that responsibility is joint and several, which I believe it will probably be, it will be very important to have clear delineations of responsibility.

This suggestion sounds straightforward, but it definitely isn't and so I have listed some questions to consider and I am sure there are significantly more questions associated with responsibility that you all will have.

Questions to answer about the responsibility issue

- Are property owners that are adjacent to a sidewalk crossing obliged to keep the sidewalk clear of snow, even in the street?
- Is the city obliged to remove snow in the city right-of-way at the sidewalk boundary?
- If the snow is accumulated in the street boundary and it is the city's responsibility, is there a prioritization of streets and clearing schedule to deal with these boundaries?
- If the responsibility is both the owner's and city's responsibility, how is that responsibility communicated clearly?
- Should there be fees levied on property owners more quickly that don't keep the network open?
- Should sidewalk conditions be actively monitored, rather than the use of a complaints system?
- Can citizens send invoices to the city for clearing a city street where the boundary has not been cleared in weeks?

2. The snow and ice prioritization policy does little to address sidewalks and needs a significant overhaul. I would urge the Council to ask the City to significantly update the prioritization plan and consider writing a separate sidewalk and trails snow removal plan.

In the current plan, all sidewalks in the entire city are prioritized under category 4. That is the only mention of sidewalks. It does not prioritize which sidewalks should be cleared, but really ignores them by lumping them all together with trails. Lumping all sidewalks and trails together gives Ames City Staff no guidance as to when to clear the sidewalk boundaries and I am guessing this is why the boundaries of sidewalks are rarely cleared without complaints. This snow and ice prioritization plan could use significant updating in many different areas to provide more clarity and direction to the staff and contractors actually doing the work. I am not saying it needs to be overly complicated, but this document does little prioritizing and basically just lays out at what depths snow removal equipment will be dispatched.

In an updated plan for example, the city could prioritize sidewalks along snow routes and then develop a list of important connecting sidewalks to clear initially. It could also assign a sidewalk liaison that oversees boundary and other side walk issues or set out a time frame for boundary clearing that is communicated to the public. An example of this communication could be that Ames is committed to clearing sidewalk boundaries by 96 hours, post storm.

As an aside, it could also be argued that if most of the snow accumulation in the boundaries are actually occurring in city streets, those boundaries are actually priority 1 - 3 in the City's plan. This demonstrates why the plan needs clarity and should be revamped.

3. Communication on snow clearing issues should be made clear to all staff people charged with dealing with snow clearing and other snow or ice-related issues. Developing an actual plan for sidewalk boundary clearing and dealing with this gray area will go a long way to getting everyone on the same page and those expectations should be clearly communicated to all staff. Right now, without my constant and

fairly annoying complaints, the sidewalks in my neighborhood and across Old Town would be impassable for mobility challenged individuals for weeks longer. Even when I do complain, and the City dispatches a crew, the 'clearing' of the boundary isn't typically done in a fashion that enables use by all people and so I wonder if the staff or contractors are told why they are clearing these boundaries. In many cases, snow from the street was just pushed back into the right-of-way and drifts are left on the sidewalk. This work is generally done by a truck-sized plow that is insufficient for the job because there are often times two boundaries at each corner and so the plow may clear one, but obscure the other sidewalk. I have seen how the boundaries have been cleared in Old Town and the pick-up truck plow definitely isn't the right tool for the job.

4. Communicate with Iowa State about their practices for sidewalk boundary clearing. Can Ames learn from how Iowa State is able to quickly clear their sidewalks? The University generally keeps their sidewalk network well maintained and address boundary issues almost immediately after storms. This is probably because responsibility for Iowa State sidewalk clearing is pretty straightforward, but they may have insights into how to facilitate efficient boundary clearing. As an aside, Iowa State generally uses less ice melt than the City and incorporates sand in their operations that is probably more environmentally friendly. I think collaboration with Iowa State would make sense and is probably occurring, but they do have significant insight into how to quickly clear a sidewalk network. Their sidewalk network is clear weeks before the Ames network and it has to be because of the students. I think we should try to emulate that sense of responsibility for Ames residents that need and want to use the sidewalk network in the wintertime too.

5. Develop a plan for buying equipment that would facilitate proper clearing of the sidewalk boundary that is the right tool for the job. Purchase of these implements can be spread across years, but planning for these purchases should be done now, if deemed necessary.

Lastly, I want to be very clear that I am not espousing for the city to spend more money on snow clearing. I am espousing that the sidewalk network should be walkable for citizens in Ames throughout the year and that will take slight shifts in priorities. I am asking the Council to set priorities and make tradeoffs to ensure for better pedestrian access to the sidewalk network. Right now the only priorities that are demonstrated by actions are that the City is only devoted to keeping the road and parking network clear. It has significantly neglected the sidewalk network and does not even allocate specific funds to keep sidewalks clear.

Budgeting for snow removal will always involve tradeoffs, but I would like to push back on something that both Mayor Haila and Justin Clausen have stated to me. They have both stated to me that the City faces budgetary issues and therefore cannot prioritize clearing of the sidewalk boundary for weeks, if not longer, because of the cost. This type of logical fallacy that they are employing is the 'either-or' fallacy. They are basically saying that the City is going to do everything the same and we will prioritize all of the automobile clearing in this city and anything that is proposed beyond that will be extremely expensive because it will be on top of the City's current spending. That is a complete fallacy and one I hope you will disabuse yourselves of because it does not allow you to see the whole policy picture. If we take a step back, let's look at what is actually really expensive. It is incredibly expensive to provide snow removal for automobiles immediately after a storm. We prioritize all roads, parking areas and parking lots. The clearing budget is devoted almost entirely for cars or the storage of cars. If we also took in to account all the road maintenance that is done because of freezing and thawing, then we would have an even bigger number to attribute to prioritizing only automobiles. Right now, the City of Ames prioritizes the clearing of all streets, parking lots, and on-street parking areas prior to getting to any sidewalks. We also prioritize

moving piles of snow to other places prior to having a clear sidewalk network. What I am suggesting isn't expensive, but it has been deemed too expensive by both Justin Clausen and the Mayor without any analysis mind you. Please know that all policy making is prioritizing and right now the City does not prioritize a 12-month sidewalk network, even though it has a 10 hour snow ordinance. Our citizens clear almost all of the sidewalk network through their own labor or capital. That private spending in time and money is being wasted because we cannot finish the job at the sidewalk boundary. When you look at the functional policy documents and spending, it becomes clear that the City considers pedestrians an afterthought. Those afterthoughts are school children, college kids, elderly members of our community, people without automobiles, mobility challenged individuals, and anyone who would like to walk the streets of Ames safely in the wintertime. We call ourselves a pedestrian friendly city, let's make a commitment to actually making it a reality 12 months a year. You have an opportunity to make the city more accessible all year long and it won't be costly, it will just take a different set of priorities. Ensuring a functioning sidewalk network significantly improves the lives of lower income residents, young and old people, those who don't have or don't want to drive, and those that want to be active outside in the wintertime. I urge you to take up this issue and make Ames more accessible.

Thank you very much.

Best,

Kyle

On Feb 1, 2024, at 9:57 AM, Clausen, Justin <Justin.Clausen@cityofames.org> wrote:

Mr. Poorman,

Thank you for reaching out to the Mayor and City Council. They asked that I review your email from January 19, 2024 and provide you with a response. Your email contained three main points and I will address each one below:

1. **Sidewalk network unusable for many people after large snow events** – Snow and ice control across the City requires a partnership between City operations and private property actions. This is especially true where the intersection of each one's responsibility meet. As pointed out in your email this is true where a sidewalk curb ramp enters a street to allow pedestrians to cross the street. The City expects that adjacent property owners will clear sidewalk, including the piles of snow that obstruct the sidewalk from the street. When those piles are out into the street, the City will come back through and remove the snow that is in the street. The events from January 8th through the 18th presented some tremendous challenges for the community. The snow amounts broke 5- and 7-day records with the amount of snow that accumulated in addition to the bitter cold and wind that followed. Snow plowing was continuous, even after residents had cleared their sidewalks. With over 20 inches of snow there wasn't much room to continue to push the snow onto the parking areas and as such the snow fell back into the street area. That begins to leave those piles closer to and at times into the street. While that isn't what we desire, it is a reality of numerous heavy snowfall events. As I noted above the City does come back through and push back and/or clear areas where snow is piled in the street. In the recent events it took over a week before we could get into some of those sidewalk priorities due to the continued frequent nature of the snow and the sheer amount of snow we received during the time period. I concur that the transportation system in the City of Ames is much more than the street network. There is a finite number of resources available to work on all the priorities within snow and ice control in the City of Ames. Because of that we have a tiered priority system in our snow and ice control policy (a copy can be found

here: www.cityofames.org/snow) to meet the stated intent of the snow and ice control policy. The intent is to provide safe and efficient movement of the traveling public and emergency response vehicles. Sidewalks in this policy are on the fourth tier of priority (see excerpt from policy below) so there will be time delays after an event where we continue to work through our priorities before we get to sidewalks. I concur that the priorities do emphasize the street network first, however the reason for that is due to emergency response vehicles like police, fire, emergency medical, etc, needing access to the street network in order to serve those needs. Sidewalk complaints are still a critical piece of the public communicating with us on where there are issues. We will work to publicize more information about this in a timely manner leading up to and after snow event.

PRIORITIES

The City Council has established the following priorities for **snow plowing** during winter weather events:

Priority	Classification	Actual Depth of Snow When Service Levels Apply	Depth of Snow/Timing When Plowing Commences
1	Arterial Streets (Appendix A), Snow Routes (Appendix B), Priority Routes (Appendix C)	2"	Plowing starts when snow depth/forecast will allow for efficient plow operations and will be continuous until final clean up.
2	Main Street, Campustown, Somerset Business Districts	2"	Plowing starts when snow depth/forecast will allow for efficient plow operations. Clean up will likely occur overnight.
3	Residential Streets, Circles and Cul-de-sacs (Non Snow Routes)	3"	Plowing in residential areas typically only occurs when 3" or more of snow accumulates. Plowing typically starts when snowfall ends unless forecasts show a prolonged event.
4	Parking Lots, Sidewalks, Trails, and Shared Use Paths	1"	Plowing will typically start after snowfall ends and after street priorities are finished.
5	Alleys	4"	Plowing in alleys will typically only occur when 4" or more of snow accumulates. Plowing typically starts when snowfall ends unless the forecast shows a prolonged event.

During an average storm, the goal is that snow plowing operations will be completed in 16 hours. Actual performance will vary greatly, depending upon factors such as actual snowfall amount vs. forecast amount, air and pavement temperatures, previous accumulations, etc... It is important to note that many of these factors are outside of the control of the City. The on duty supervisor will have the discretion to make decisions in line with the goals and expectations of the snow policy.

2. **Fragmented snow clearing problems impact Main Street pedestrian zone** – Clearing of sidewalks along Main Street follow similar procedures as the rest of the City where the adjacent property owner is responsible for removal of snow from sidewalks. Because there isn't any area for snow storage in the Main Street area, the City allows adjacent property owners to push the snow from the sidewalks into the street parking area and the City then pushes and piles the snow and hauls it away from the downtown area. Each property is different in their snow removal practices. This has been discussed in the past with the Ames Main Street staff for them to look at a coordinated snow removal practice, however it would be up to the individual properties to work together to make that happen. It would require City Council action directing staff to begin to removing snow from sidewalks along Main Street if City Council wanted to pursue this option. Thus far there has been no change in any of the practices along Main

Street. I will share your comments with the Ames Main Street Executive Director so that they are aware of the concerns.

3. **Over use of snow melt chemicals is an issue in the Main Street pedestrian zone** – I concur that there are wildly varying levels of chemicals used. I have provided training for businesses and contractors, as recently as this past fall, in use of deicing chemicals. I have spent time with area business owners demonstrating best practices for use of deicing chemicals. There currently is no ordinance governing the use of deicing chemicals in the City of Ames. I was heavily involved in the reconstruction along Main Street with the new pavers and had communicated directly with some of the businesses about the overuse of deicing chemicals. I will work with our Ames Main Street staff to work again with the businesses to help educate again. I will also share your comments with the Ames Public Library to see if we can make some improvements.

I appreciate your time and well thought out comments and your desire to make our community better. Thank you!

Justin

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