

City of Cambridge Department of Public Works

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To the City Manager:

The Department of Public Works, in collaboration with the Department of Human Service Programs (DHPS) has prepared this response to AR 26-21 requesting that the City Manager be and is hereby requested to confer with relevant City staff and report back with information on the following as the first step in the exploration of a potential Cambridge Snow Corps program:

- 1. Data on the City's Snow Exemption program for low-income elderly and disabled homeowners, including how many residents are currently signed up for snow exemptions*
- 2. Data on the Student Shoveler Program, including how many teens are currently included in the program, how many new sign-ups there are per year, and how many requests the Council on Aging has received for connections with student shovelers*
- 3. SeeClickFix data on "Icy or Unshoveled Sidewalks", and any other data on unshoveled crosswalk or bus stop requests, including how many requests have been made and responded to so far in 2026, the geographical distribution of the requests, and other relevant patterns in the data*
- 4. The number of citations issued for icy or unshoveled sidewalks in the last three years and 2026 year-to-date*

Summary

The Department of Public Works works closely with other city departments, as well as community groups and commissions, to evaluate how to continuously expand and improve our snow operations across the city. Public Works, together with the Water Department, the Cambridge Department of Transportation, Commission for Persons with Disabilities, and DHSP have broadened operations over many years to achieve a more effective snow management program for salting, plowing, and snow removal as well as related compliance with City ordinance requirements for sidewalk snow clearance. All work is also done in coordination with our Emergency Services Departments (Police, Fire and Emergency Communications) to ensure they can be responsive to emergency situations and the City can achieve compliance with any snow emergency declarations and life safety needs throughout the community during and after a storm.

Collaborative snow efforts have expanded for a variety of reasons, but primary among them is continued attention to pedestrian access across the city, most particularly for persons with disabilities and residents accessing various public transportation options. Additionally, over the last number of years there has been a significantly increased demand for clearing bicycle facilities immediately after snow events.

The Department of Public Works has been using new technology and equipment to both improve the efficiency of both our snow personnel management processes and our equipment deployment and tracking. While smarter deployment of resources has greatly assisted our snow clearance operations, there are also offsetting challenges. The snow contractor marketplace is shrinking, current snow farm/dumping locations may not be available long-term, and the probability of more extreme winter weather events is increasing because of climate change.

This response provides available data on pedestrian and accessibility focused snow programs and enforcement procedures. It also provides context for these programs and enforcement activities as part of city-wide snow operations and a historical breakdown of related costs.

Winter storm response related to pedestrian accessibility

Snow Shoveling Exemption Program

The Department of Human Service Programs' (DHSP) Council on Aging oversees the Snow Shoveling Exemption Program. Through the program, DHSP staff from Danehy Park shovel the sidewalks of eligible homeowners after clearing public roadways, schools, and public building properties. This program is available to low-income homeowners over the age of 60 who meet program income guidelines and have a disability or physical condition that prevents them from safely shoveling snow.

The number of properties participating in the program fluctuates year to year. Between 2020 and 2026, there was a range of 41-62 properties serviced by the program. Winter 2025-2026 numbers were the lowest, with 41 eligible residents currently signed up.

Student Shoveler Program

DHSP also oversees the Student Shoveler Program, through the Council on Aging and the Office of Workforce Development. DHSP compiles a list of Cambridge high school students who are available to shovel snow for seniors and people with disabilities. All students who participated in the Mayor's Summer Youth Employment Program are contacted and, if interested, can sign up for the list and indicate the neighborhood(s) where they're available.

The program structure is:

- Residents interested in connecting with a student shoveler contact the Council on Aging for a list of local shovelers.
- Homeowners are responsible for contacting students directly once the Council on Aging provides the list. Homeowners are advised to reach out to students prior to snowfall to discuss shoveler availability, payment, and other expectations.
- Pay is negotiated between the homeowner and the student, and the homeowner pays the student directly. On average, pay for shoveling ranges from \$25 - \$40 per job, depending on the amount of snow and size of the area being shoveled.

The number of available shovelers varies from year to year but has been steadily increasing. This winter had the highest number of students in the program's history, with 117 student shovelers signed up. There was significant program growth after the 2019/2020 season, when DHSP began recruiting through a Google form emailed to MSYEP students.

Snow Season	Number of Student Shovelers
2019/2020	8
2020/2021	33
2021/2022	30
2023/2024	26
2024/2025	64
2025/2026	117

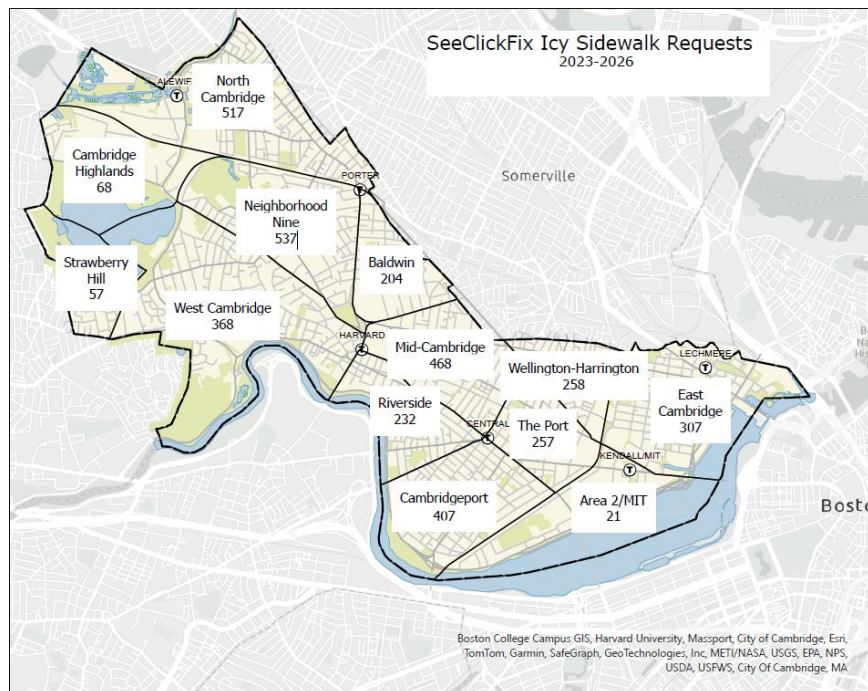
In the 2025/2026 winter season, the Council on Aging received 103 inquiries for the Student Shoveler Program.

SeeClickFix Data on Icy or Unshoveled Sidewalks

SeeClickFix (SCF) helps residents reach the City online or via their smartphone to request services or get help with non-emergency issues. SCF has become a valuable tool in helping Public Works assess our snow operations, organize staff resources, and respond to resident concerns in a timely manner. "Icy or Unshoveled Sidewalk" is a high-volume SCF category, which Public Works tracks closely. The Department monitors SCF entries for "Icy or Unshoveled Sidewalks" and deploys staff to investigate and resolve the complaints appropriately, including issuing citations, where appropriate.

Complaints are not isolated to a particular City neighborhood or geographic area. The map below shows all "Icy or Unshoveled Sidewalk" complaints since November 1, 2023, by neighborhood.

Icy or Unshoveled Sidewalk SCF Complaints – Since 11/1/2023



Icy or Unshoveled Sidewalk – Inspection and Ticketing

Not all SCF entries for Icy or Unshoveled Sidewalks result in a citation to the homeowner. Pedestrian access in Cambridge is governed by clear ordinance requirements, and the City uses both education and enforcement to support compliance. Property owners must clear snow from sidewalks next to their properties within 12 hours after daytime snowfall ends, and by 1 PM when snow falls overnight. Ice must be treated within 6 hours of forming. Public Works compliance officers and engineers inspect all sidewalks reported through the SCF system. But citations/tickets are only issued when property owners do not meet ordinance requirements to clear snow and ice in a timely manner.

Icy or Unshoveled Sidewalks - Complaints & Citations

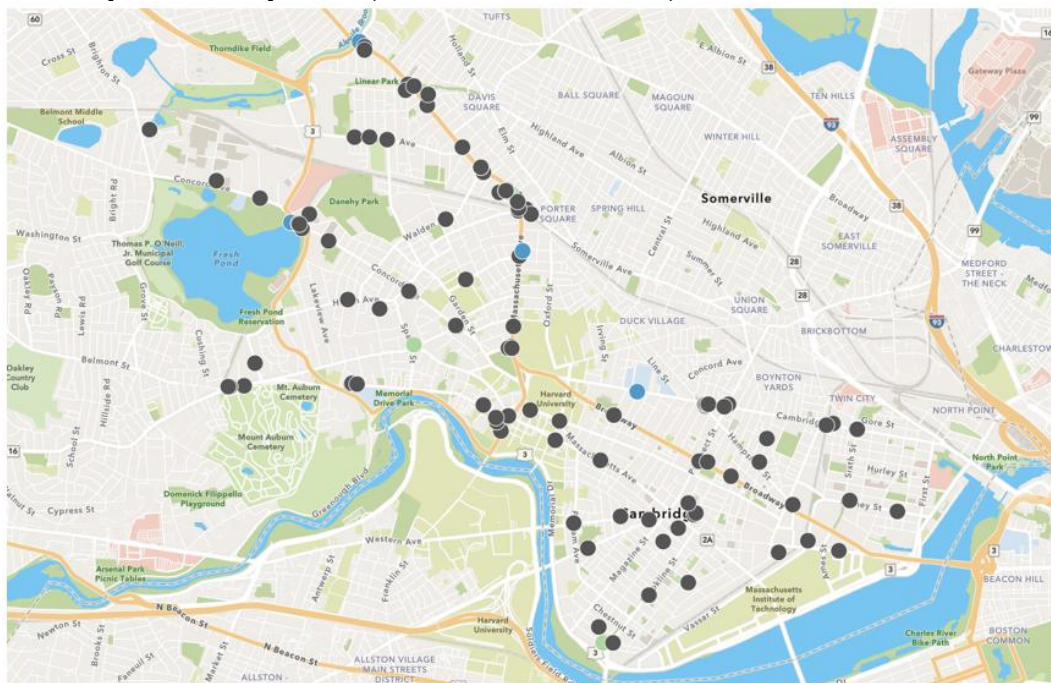
Snow Season	# of SCF Complaints Received	# of Citations Issued
2016-2017	1068	546
2017-2018	933	166
2018-2019	591	210
2019-2020	695	326
2020-2021	758	223
2021-2022	970	274
2022-2023	223	83
2023-2024	403	188
2024-2025	1270	578
2025-2026	2059	569
Total:	8970	3163

As expected, both complaint numbers and ticket numbers vary widely from year to year because they depend on the number and severity of snow and ice events, as well as the unique conditions of each storm. Public Works will continue exploring ways to strengthen enforcement, but the number of tickets issued is not, on its own, a reliable measure of how accessible sidewalks are or how much effort inspectors and engineers are putting into this work. Over the past several years, the City has seen higher levels of compliance immediately following storms, due in large part to ongoing education and enforcement efforts.

Unshoveled Crosswalks or Bus Stops

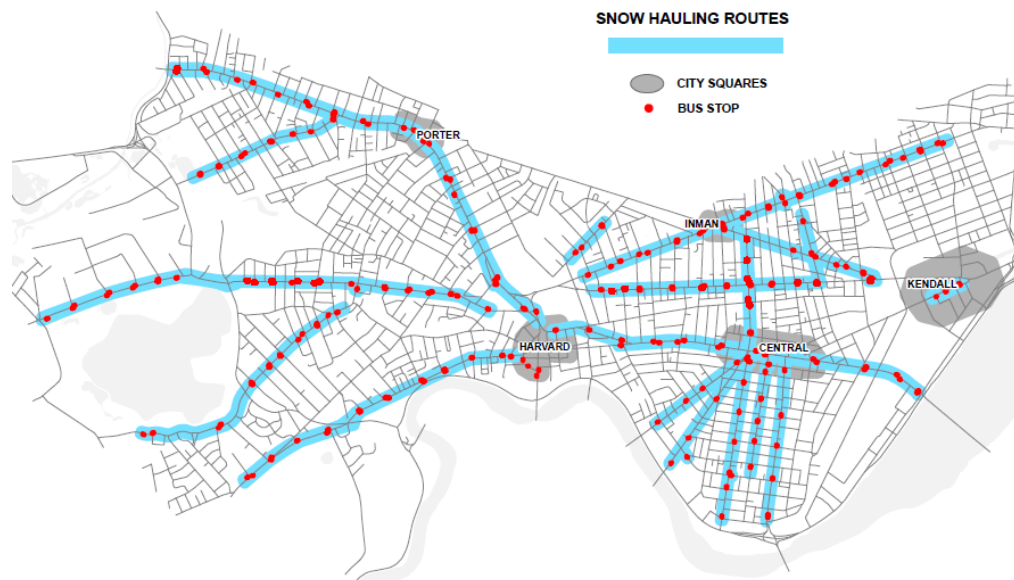
Unshoveled crosswalks and/or bus stops are typically reported within the “Icy or Unshoveled Sidewalk” category but may also come in through the “Icy or Snowy Street” or “Sidewalk Obstruction” or “Other” categories in SCF. The map below shows 114 bus stop related SCF complaints received from 12/1/2025 through 3/13/2026.

Bus Stop SCF Complaints (12/1/2025 – 3/13/2026)



The MBTA is responsible for snow removal at many bus stops in Cambridge. However, during a snow removal/hauling operation, Public Works crews and contractors prioritize making bus stops accessible to the street, and clear just under 225 locations across the City. The map below shows Public Works snow hauling areas and the bus stops we clear. As crews remove snow from these streets, they also clear crosswalks and pedestrian ramps along these routes.

Public Works Snow Hauling/Removal Map



Many bus stops for which a SCF complaint was received during the 2025/2026 snow season were subsequently cleared as part of Public Works' snow hauling/removal operations. However, SCF complaints may come in at any point during a winter storm whereas a snow hauling operation may not start until a few days after a major snow event, as explained in greater detail below.

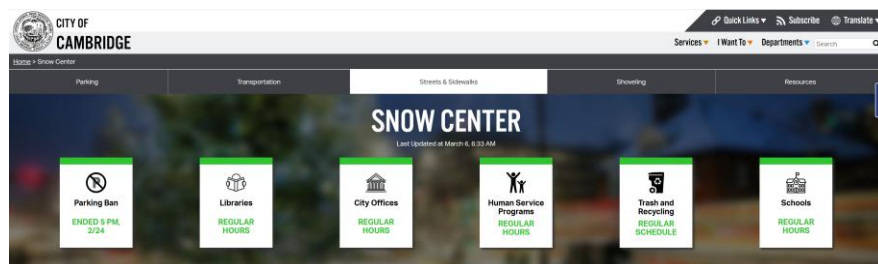
For areas outside of the snow hauling locations noted above, clearing access to crosswalks and pedestrian ramps is the responsibility of the abutting property owner. Public Works has issued 74 citations to property owners specifically for not providing access to crosswalks or clearing blocked pedestrian ramps during the 2025/2026 snow season.

Overview of City Snow Operations

City snow operations include salting, plowing, or removal/hauling – or some combination of the three – depending on the winter storm. City crews and contracted teams currently manage a snow clearing program that maintains more than 125 miles of roadway (including 17.9 miles of bike lane), and 30 miles of sidewalks -which is over 10% of all sidewalks citywide. This work goes well beyond what is required by ordinance and is designed to reduce the impact of snowstorms on elderly residents and people with disabilities who need safe, reliable routes throughout the city after a storm.

Over the past decade, this program has expanded substantially. In addition to clearing areas around public buildings and city owned property, the department now prioritizes access to public transportation facilities, including MBTA subway stations, bus stops, pedestrian ramps, adjacent crosswalks, and other high use pedestrian areas such as elderly housing complexes.

These operations are carried out using hand crews, walk behind snow blowers, and sit on sidewalk plows equipped for plowing and salting. Each year, Public Works meets with the Commission for Persons with Disabilities to review operational plans, answer questions, and gather feedback on how these services can be improved or expanded.



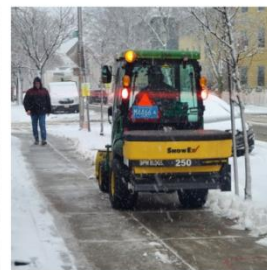
During major winter storms, information related to snow operations is centralized at the City's online Snow Center. The Snow Center is a major collaborative effort through the Communications Office to provide real-time helpful information for residents on parking, City closures, service changes, and more. The Communications Office and Public Works also partnered to provide local media outlets with better understanding and appreciation of snow operations in the 2025/2026 winter season. Through ride-along and on-site interviews, the City expanded its outreach efforts in new ways this season, and will continue to do so to better inform residents.

Public Works Pedestrian Operations at a Glance

Public Transportation Accessibility

Bus Stops/Ramps

- Cambridge Street
- Massachusetts Avenue
- Concord Avenue
- Mount Auburn Street
- Western Avenue
- River Street
- Huron Avenue
- Rindge Avenue
- Broadway
- Prospect Street
- Pearl Street
- Brookline Street
- Green Street
- Granite Street
- Aberdeen Ave
- Magazine Street
- Putnam Ave– Western to Brookline
- Bigelow Street
- Inman Street
- Webster Street
- Windsor Street
- Garden Street
- Main Street
- Kirkland Street
- Quincy Street
- Columbia Street
- Hampshire Street



Pedestrian Operations

-  30+ miles of City-Cleared Sidewalks/ Curb Ramps
-  Abutting schools, public buildings, public open space
-  City-owned parking lots and garages
-  Residential exemption program

Storm response does not end when the snow stops falling; it is a multiday, multilayered operation that can continue for more than a week after the initial event. Each storm and snow season is unique, depending on both the frequency and severity of events. But lighter snow (1-3 inches) is typically handled through a salting operation with in-house crews, moderate snow (3-6 inches) would require a plowing operation with both in-house and contract crews, and heavy snow (6+ inches) may include snow hauling/removal operations.

Snow Hauling/Removal

When the City has a snow removal operation, contractors and City crews are deployed to remove snow from designated locations, prioritized by public safety impacts. Currently, school bus routes and waiting areas are prioritized first, followed by major arteries (i.e., any included in a parking ban) that require additional widening to ensure safe travel. After that, crews focus on clearing bus stops, crosswalks, and pedestrian ramps and along major routes consistent with the snow hauling map, and finally return to secondary streets affected by a parking ban where roadway width must be restored before parking can resume. Overall, this work includes targeted clearing of piles within intersections and at crossings, as this can create a significant barrier to pedestrians and is the most difficult snow for individual owners to address when it is heavy/ wet. Public Works is developing a plan to better communicate the locations and timing for snow removal in future storms, including more transparent and consistent communication of what will not be removed.



It is also important to note that snow removal requires different equipment and carries more rigorous contractual obligations than standard plowing. There is an exceptional amount of labor and specialized equipment required to clear sidewalks, bus stops, pedestrian ramps, and crosswalks to the extent needed to make the areas safe and accessible after a major storm. The operation extends over many days with significant costs.

Maintaining Cycling Facilities Through Winter

In addition to pedestrian access areas, Public Works has long included traditional on street bike lanes in its snow clearing program. In the early 2000s that work expanded to include raised cycle tracks. As the City has added more protected cycling facilities—and especially since the adoption of the Cycle Safety Ordinance in 2020—the amount of bike infrastructure requiring winter maintenance has grown significantly.

As new raised cycle tracks and protected bike lanes come online, there are increasing challenges in ensuring that adequate equipment and staffing are available to clear these facilities quickly and safely after winter storms. Maintaining this infrastructure throughout the winter places additional demands on

our resources, particularly given the expectation that these routes be cleared to dry, and passable as soon as possible following a winter storm.

Snow Farms

Once cleared/removed, the City transports the snow to areas known as snow farms. Public Works currently hauls snow to the large parking lot on the west side of Danehy Park on New Street and, when permitted, to a Harvard University property in Allston. This year, an additional temporary location on Mooney Street was also available. While we expect continued access to the Harvard site for the next several years, the property is ultimately slated for university expansion. The Mooney Street lot may also be unavailable in future winters due to redevelopment.



Snow stored at these sites must be actively managed to ensure sufficient capacity for subsequent storms and, in the case of Danehy Park, to prevent late season snow from interfering with parking needed for spring sports. At this time, the City has chosen not to incorporate snow melters into its operations. Snow melters are extremely costly, require intensive maintenance, and carry a significant carbon footprint especially when combined with the emissions associated with hauling.

However, the long-term viability of existing snow dumping locations is uncertain due to residential concerns and ongoing development in Allston. As these pressures increase, the City will likely need to revisit the question of whether snow melters should play a role in future snow management strategies.

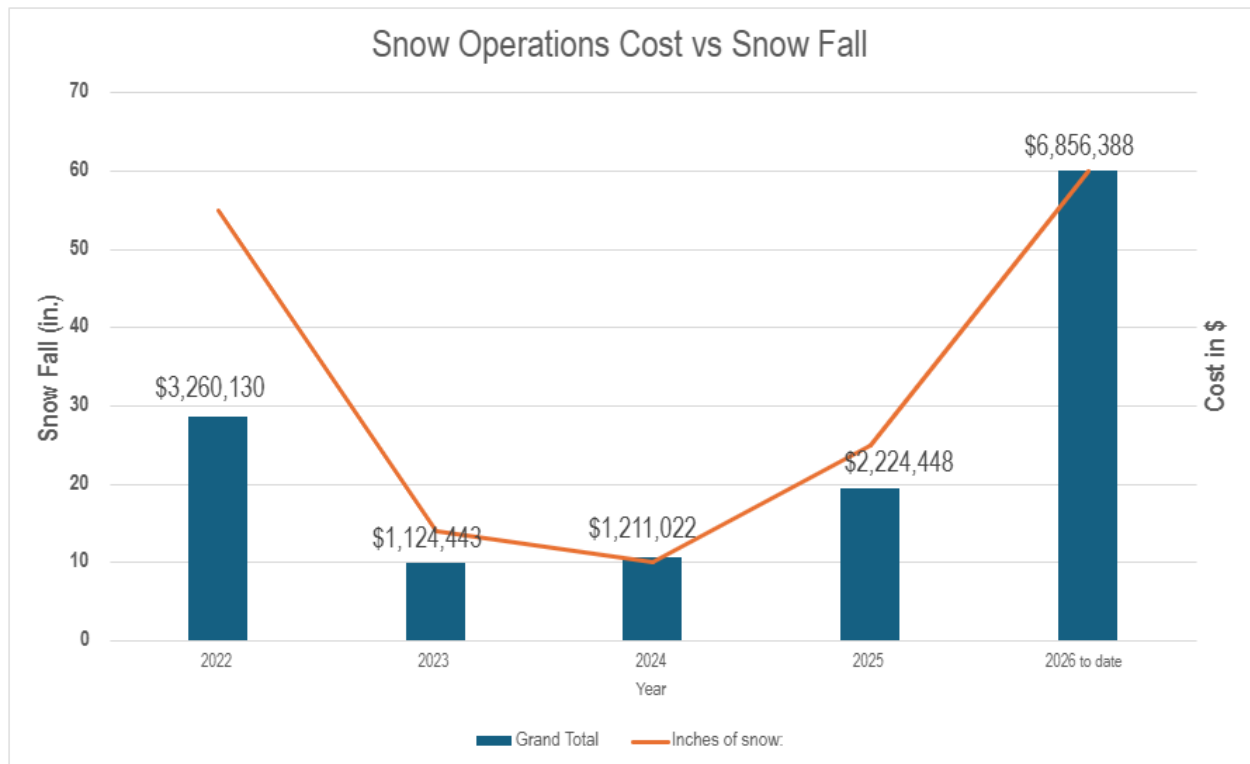
Ongoing Program Expansion & Related Costs

Overall, the City's snow operations – particularly snow hauling/removal – have expanded significantly over time. Increased sidewalk and pedestrian-focused clearance, additional bike facilities requiring specialized equipment, and indeed the ever-expanding snow removal operation for City roadways overall, make it challenging to further expand these programs without significant financial cost.

Snow removal operations alone generally take two to four nights to complete, with contractor costs for the 2025/2026 snow season averaging from \$250,000 to \$300,000 per night. Depending on the severity of the storm, this work may extend even longer.

The chart and table below demonstrate the ever-increasing cost of snow operations, both as total costs and cost per inch of snow. While snow totals in and of themselves may not give the full picture of overall winter weather conditions, these graphs and numbers demonstrate that the city

is continuing to invest in winter weather management. It is informative that in taking a five-year moving average from 2015 through 2026 the city has increased expenditure on a per inch basis, year after year.



5-yr moving average of winter weather as a cost per inch of snow	
5 Year Periods	Average spent on snow per inch
2015-2019	\$50,101.50
2016-2020	\$49,238.43
2017-2021	\$50,016.95
2018-2022	\$50,913.23
2019-2023	\$54,270.61
2020-2024	\$61,102.38
2021-2025	\$67,692.75
2022-2026	\$89,490.43

Costs are only projected to increase, given the challenging private contractor environment, the lack of snow farms and the evidence of more extreme weather. While it is not suggested that additional attention should not be given to further improve our programs, it is important to recognize that maintaining existing programs is a challenge in and of itself.

Conclusion

As noted above, while expanding winter operations is becoming increasingly challenging, the City recognizes that as new streetscapes and pedestrian facilities are built, we must plan for their year-round maintenance—including sidewalk snow clearance. Many of our newer roadway designs have improved safety and accessibility for all users, but they also introduce maintenance challenges that require ongoing evaluation. At the same time, residents and businesses need to understand their responsibilities for keeping sidewalks passable as these landscapes evolve.

For winter operations specifically, Public Works will develop updated educational materials ahead of the 2026–2027 winter season. These materials will outline what property owners and businesses are required to do under the City’s sidewalk snow clearing ordinance, as well as what they can expect from the City’s operations. We will also review potential adjustments to our snow clearing practices, particularly in areas where new designs make sidewalk maintenance more complex.

Very truly yours,

John Nardone
Commissioner