

Major Snow Event Response Plan Update

Date: March 13, 2024

To: Infrastructure and Environment Committee

From: General Manager, Transportation Services

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report provides an update on the progress of work prepared to date by Transportation Services (TS) to revise its Major Snow Event Response Plan (Plan), formerly known as the Extreme Winter Weather Plan.

The purpose of this Plan is to describe how TS will address weather events which result in significant snow accumulation beyond what Toronto normally experiences. This accumulation creates obstructions in the right of way, primarily due to insufficient snow storage capacity. Storms of this kind have a much greater impact on the transportation infrastructure, and by extension the public, and such events can not be fully addressed within the Council-approved levels of service for a normal snowfall. Recovering roads, sidewalks and other infrastructure after these major events requires extensive snow removal activity in addition to typical salting and plowing.

In recent years, enhancements have been made to the winter services program for typical snow events, to incorporate the City's equity and accessibility goals, reflect new and different types of infrastructure, and maintain a rapidly expanding cycling network. The City's approach to major snow events needs to be modernized in the same way to address the changing needs of the City and its residents. The Major Snow Event Response Plan does not address the City's entire response to extreme winter weather that can include one or a combination of freezing rain or ice precipitation, flash flooding, flash freezes, high winds, extreme cold temperatures, and/or any of these combined with snow. Snow event response forms one area of action under Toronto Emergency Management's Extreme Winter Weather Coordination Plan.

Since the major storms in January 2022 and March 2023, TS has created some new processes for a major snow event, including earlier preparation and more frequent release of communications to the public; creating new protocols with 311 that ensure winter maintenance teams can best focus on priority areas but also assist residents with time-sensitive emergency needs; and updating the PlowTO website to provide residents with an alternative to 311 for information about the snow clearing activities.

Work to update the Major Snow Event Response Plan began in 2023 with both internal and third-party reviews of existing practices, and a review of best practices in other jurisdictions. More detailed analysis continues to review levels of service, available equipment and staff resources, reassessing priority areas for response, applying lenses of accessibility, equity, and goals in the City's Vision Zero Road Safety Plan and Net Zero Climate Strategy, and communication strategies. Consultation with selected communities and interest groups will take place in spring 2024, including people with disabilities and people who cycle. An updated Major Snow Event Response Plan will be presented to IEC in July 2024 along with the first annual winter maintenance operations update. This plan will be a dynamic document, with review and updates after new major snow events to iteratively drive continuous improvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The General Manager, Transportation Services recommends that the Infrastructure and Environment Committee:

1. Receive the report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

Transportation Services confirms that there are no financial implications resulting from the recommendation included in this report.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

City Council, at its March 29, 2022, requested the General Manager, Transportation Services to:

1. Consult with internal and external stakeholders and to report back to the Infrastructure and Environment Committee on an Extreme Winter Weather Response Plan in the first quarter of 2023.
2. To implement initiatives and service improvements as soon as feasible and in advance of the next winter season where possible.
3. To meet with Ward Councillors in advance of the next winter season, regarding improvements to snow services, including ward-specific contracts and measures.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.IE28.11>

The Toronto Accessibility Advisory Committee, at its February 22, 2022 recommends that City Council direct the General Manager, Transportation Services to:

- a. Recognize and quickly respond to Urgent Service Requests made by people living with disabilities or seniors, even during "black-out" periods;
- b. Create a proactive accessibility service standard by incorporating an intersectional gender equity lens similar to Sweden's "Gender Equal Plowing Strategy";
- c. Prohibit City snowplows from storing snow and ice on sidewalks and bike lanes that create additional accessibility barriers;
- d. Develop a public education campaign to inform property owners, business operators, residents, landlords and tenants about the City's winter maintenance strategy and to clarify the division of responsibility for snow and ice clearing and removal; and
- e. Report through the 2023 Budget process on the funding required to ensure that the City can meet its revised levels of service including for winter storms with over 35 cm and over 50 cm of snow.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.DI19.3>

2. City Council forward Council's decision on the report from Transportation Services on January 2022's major snowstorm and winter maintenance operational response to the Toronto Accessibility Advisory Committee for information. City Council, at its meeting of February 2, 2022, directed the General Manager, Transportation Services to provide a post-operational report on the January 16-17, 2022 major snow event to the March 29, 2022 meeting of the Infrastructure and Environment Committee.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2022.EX29.15>

COMMENTS

Summary of Snow Events

The most prevalent snow events in Toronto range from 2cm up to 10cm of accumulation in a single event. The City has well-established processes and levels of service for recovering infrastructure for regular use after it is impacted by snowfall. Based on the past 10 years' experience, every November to April Toronto can expect between one and three storms over 10cm; and a storm greater than 25cm about once every two years.

These few exceptional snow events require extra time, activity, and equipment to recover the right of way infrastructure. What makes a snow event exceptional depends on not only total snow accumulation, but also the nature of the snow (e.g. heavy and wet vs light and powdery) and whether or not temperatures following the storm are warm enough to assist with melting the snow. The response to major snow events can become even more

challenging when snow is mixed with high winds, ice or freezing rain, extreme cold temperatures, or multiple snow events in quick succession. Council requested that Transportation Services report back with a plan to address these storm events of larger magnitude and impact. This report provides an update on the work to develop that Plan. A full report with a completed Major Snow Event Response Plan will be provided in July 2024 along with the first annual winter maintenance operations update.

Key Terms For Winter Maintenance Activity

The following definitions are important for this discussion.

Direct liquid application: Direct liquid application or anti-icing, is the application of salt brine on roads prior to frost or snowfall to prevent the bonding of snow and ice to pavement during the early period of the snowstorm.

Salting (De-icing): **Salting or** de-icing is the application of solid and/or a combination of solid and liquid material to the infrastructure which is typically done during the early stages of the snowfall and/or in conjunction with snow plowing on roads, sidewalks and bike lanes to treat icy conditions and thawing snow during or after snowfall.

Snow plowing: This is the mechanical clearing of snow to the edges or boulevards of roads, bike lanes, sidewalks and walkways during or following a snow event. Direct liquid application, salting and snow plowing are all essential pieces in the response to both normal and major snow events.

Snow removal: This is the process of removing snow from the right of way and transporting it to one of five designated snow storage areas in the city. Removal is completed either by shaving (where a snowblower moves along a curb and clears windrows that are overhanging) or the more time-consuming process of full removal (where windrows are pulled off the curb/sidewalk into the lane, and all the snow is removed). Snow removal is done on a limited basis under particular conditions, and in locations that have insufficient snow storage space within the right-of-way. Places with limited snow storage include bridge decks, bike lanes and alongside narrow sidewalks. Snow removed through this activity is collected and stored in one of five City-owned snow storage facilities.

Normal snow conditions: Refers to snow events with accumulation typically between 2cm to 10 cm in which snow can be cleared with salting and, on occasion, plowing activations. Events between 10cm and 25cm are typically treated the same way, but with more rounds of snow clearing, sometimes coupled with managed snow removal in priority areas. Attachment 1 describes the number of winter maintenance activations for each type of activity for of the past 12 years. Transportation Services' winter maintenance contracts and available equipment are scoped and scaled to complete salting and snow plowing within Council-approved levels of service (see Attachment 2). Over 1250 contractor staff and 630 City staff are available to deliver this service, including equipment operators, field investigators, maintenance patrollers, supervisors,

contract administrators and managers, and other in-house support staff to deliver the winter maintenance program.

Major snow events: Refers to weather events with substantial snow accumulation, or a series of smaller snow events which together accumulate enough snow that a significant city-wide snow removal effort is required. The incidence of major snow conditions based on cumulative events will vary based on the length of time between snowstorms but also the extent to which temperature, wind and hours of sunlight are able to generate snowmelt. Major snow events are the main focus of this report.

Major snow conditions have the potential to overwhelm the snow storage capacity of the right of way, consequently requiring snow removal operations. The speed of completing full snow removal on the right of way for a major snowstorm is limited by many factors, including but not limited to the amount of snow removal equipment on hand, the number of obstructions the equipment needs to work around (i.e parked cars, street furniture, utility infrastructure), and the time required for trucks to move the snow from the removal site to the disposal site and return.

Extreme winter weather: This can include Major Snow Events but also events or sequences of events with a range of phenomena such as freezing rain or ice precipitation, flash flooding, flash freezes, high winds, and extreme cold temperatures and a variety of combinations of these.

In 2023, the Toronto Emergency Management (TEM) office developed an Extreme Winter Weather Coordination Plan which can call upon an inter-divisional/inter-agency Incident Management Team (IMT) to support the response to extreme winter weather. The focus of this report and the subsequent Major Snowstorm Response Plan is on the snow clearing and snow removal aspect of that response. The Plan will contain reference to the TEM role in communication, coordination and activation of the IMT to coordinate the City's response and business continuity across a range of partners.

'Significant Weather Event' and 'Major Snowstorm Condition': These terms are used respectively in the Provincial regulations and City of Toronto Municipal Code to describe exceptional weather events (although neither regulation includes a specified level of snow accumulation). These terms could apply to either Major Snow Conditions or Extreme Winter Weather.

Normal Snow Conditions - Summary of Operations and Services Levels

Council has established specified levels of service for winter maintenance operations (i.e. salting, plowing). These service levels determine which operations are deployed and when, in response to imminent or in-progress snow events, the maximum amount of completion time for each salting and/or plowing activation, and the expected performance outcomes (e.g. 'bare pavement' for Expressways; 'safe and passable' for local roads). These levels of service either meet or exceed the provincially-regulated Minimum

Maintenance Standards for Highways in the City of Toronto ([O.Reg 612/06: Minimum Maintenance Standards for Highways in the City of Toronto](#)) and also reflect a higher standard than in all previous winter maintenance contracts.

Attachment 3 contains a full comparison between the Provincial Minimum Maintenance Standards and the levels of services approved by City Council. In general, the City standards require clearing to start once snow accumulation reaches defined threshold levels rather than once snow accumulation ends, and have the same or shorter time frames for completing the clearing. Perhaps most significantly, the City of Toronto initiates sidewalk clearing when accumulation reaches 2cm and aims to finish in less than 12 hours; in contrast the province only requires snow depth to be reduced to less than or equal to 8cm and in a 48 hour time period.

The City's service levels have been enhanced in recent years to modernize the City's winter maintenance program, introducing greater equity in snow clearing across geography, and providing a more even level of service across infrastructure for motorized and non-motorized modes of travel. These changes are essential to meet our obligations under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act; to recognize the needs of our aging population; to meet the City's Vision Zero objectives, and to support the increased use of walking, cycling and transit required to meet our goals of net zero carbon emissions by 2040.

These enhancements include:

- Clearing all sidewalks of snow following 2cm of accumulation, removing criteria that limited which sidewalks were cleared; and applying the 2cm threshold from early November to early April (instead of December to March).
- Managed snow removal during even normal snow events, focused on areas that have limited snow storage capacity (meaning that cleared snow inherently prevents an area from being safe and passable). Targeted locations include bridge decks (and the sidewalks on bridges), bicycle lanes, transit stops and narrow sidewalks.
- Over ninety-five per cent of all sidewalks in Toronto now receive mechanical sidewalk snow clearing. Due to sidewalk obstructions and narrow spaces, the remaining sidewalks are manually cleared by workers. Clearing begins when snow accumulates to a depth of 2cm.
- The introduction of "required outcomes" for road and sidewalk surface conditions rather than simply the number of passes that a snow clearing vehicle must conduct.
- All winter maintenance equipment is equipped with GPS devices that collect essential data programmed into a real-time dashboard to verify contractor performance, and City staff conduct spot-checking both proactively, and in response to 311 Service Requests.

Winter services responses are not only based on the amount of snow but must be adapted based on other factors including: air and surface temperatures; time of day of snow event; the volume, intensity, duration, location, humidity, and wind conditions; the number of consecutive snow events; and the mix of freezing rain, ice, and frost in the precipitation. Physical characteristics (e.g. presence of boulevards between road and sidewalk; presence of streetcar tracks; etc.) and microclimates in different parts of the city also

influence winter maintenance approaches and outcomes. During the winter season, staff in Transportation Services monitor weather conditions and forecasts four times per day and collaborate closely with contractors regarding when and how to activate operations; timing and location of equipment deployment are adapted to reflect any unique conditions, and to make adjustments as required throughout the event. A typical pattern for normal snow events begins with anti-icing and salting, followed by plowing for higher volumes of snow. This approach is described in Attachment 4: “Quick Guide” to the Winter Services Phased Operation Plan & Service Level Tables.

Major Snow Events Summary

Major snow events (formerly referred to as “extreme winter weather”) are snow events that exceed statistical averages for snowfall. During these events, the high levels of accumulation result in insufficient storage capacity in the right of way for all the residual snow from typical salting and plowing operations. Therefore, substantial snow removal activity must be activated in order to recover infrastructure. Substantial snow removal activities are time consuming as snow needs to be physically removed from the right of way with equipment and trucked to one of five city snow storage areas. When substantial snow removal occurs in response to a major snowstorm, the recovery of infrastructure will exceed the time and performance thresholds defined in the Council approved service levels. Similar snow removal requirements can also be caused by multiple modest-sized snow events occurring in succession, often in conjunction with cold temperatures, which means there is insufficient snow melting to free up snow storage capacity.

During the last 10 years, there were at least six major snow events within Toronto that exceeded the statistical average and were beyond the City’s capacity to manage within pre-designated service standards. One example is the storm of January 17th, 2022, when approximately 55 cm of snow fell at a rate of 5cm per hour, Recovery of infrastructure required removal of over 179,000 tonnes of snow. Full removal took 30 days after the January storm, of which 7 days reverted to snow plowing due to additional snowfall. In addition to coordinated snow removal activity, snow events of this magnitude require a comprehensive strategy of internal communications to protect emergency services and address urgent, localized needs; and external communications about challenges and progress so members of the public can know what to expect in their area. In 2022, the annual winter maintenance budget was \$89.2M; the storm in January 2022 cost \$17 million. The major storms in January 2022 and March 2023 highlighted the need to update and modernize the City’s response plan for major snow events. Despite the very mild winter and low volume of snow of the 2023-2024 season, climate change is projected to affect the incidence of large winter snow events.

The conditions caused by Major Snow Events are unique because:

- Traditional salting and plowing operations require more time per kilometre to complete.
- Storage capacity on city streets is insufficient to store snow after plowing while also maintaining clear travel paths of appropriate widths, leading to the need to deploy snow removal operations.
- Snow removal is extremely time consuming and labour intensive and requires unique and additional equipment and resources.

- Snow removal is hindered by on-street parking, roadside infrastructure such as utility poles, transit shelters, and other street furniture around which equipment must navigate.
- Equipment doing high intensity work and under continuous demand breaks down more often and requires additional maintenance to ensure fleets remain active.
- Extensive manual clearing is required around street furniture (e.g. benches, transit shelters and litter bins) and sometimes around transit vehicles, to prevent damage by heavy equipment. Manual clearing is more time-consuming, and care must be taken to prevent worker injuries or over-exposure to extreme cold.
- Narrow areas (such as bike lanes) must be cleared carefully to avoid damage to equipment and infrastructure.
- Multiple rounds of clearing and removal may be required as snowfall continues or snow shifts locations due to the sequence of clearing roads, bike lanes, sidewalks, and private property.

All these factors, and the geographic variations in how a particular snow event affects the City, requires increased level of public communication about the City's snow clearing and removal activities, and the role residents and businesses play in clearing snow and ice from sidewalks and private properties.

Current Response to Major Snow Events

As described above, the key difference between 'normal' or 'prevalent' events, and the less common 'major snow events' is the need to undertake snow removal and substantial manual clearing to bring the right of way back to normal winter operating conditions, and the additional time required to do so. Both provincial regulation and City by-laws have provisions allowing the City to suspend normal snow response standards in situations of major snowfall.

- Under Provincial O.Reg 612/06, the City can declare a 'significant weather event' when there is "an approaching or occurring weather hazard with the potential to pose a significant danger to users of the highways within the City". The City has latitude to declare such an event, and will do so based on monitoring of weather forecasts or measurements; this declaration will suspend minimum snow clearing maintenance standards until it is declared that the significant weather event has ended. [see sample declaration in Attachment 5]
- Under Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 950, Section 950-406C, the City can declare a 'major snowstorm condition' after at least 5cm of snow accumulation (and with the anticipation of substantially more snowfall). The main effect under this condition is the prohibition of parking on snow routes as identified in Schedule XVII of Chapter 950, which enhances the efficacy of snow clearing and removal on those routes. Snow routes include arterials and some collector roads. Local roads used by residents for on-street permit parking are not designated snow routes, and no parking restrictions apply to those locations under a 'major snowstorm condition' declaration. Section 950-406 states that a major snowstorm condition declaration extends for 72 hours but can be terminated early or extended, depending on the weather conditions and extent of effort required to clear and remove snow. Residents with permit parking on local streets are

encouraged to find alternative places for their vehicles, and when snow removal on a local street is scheduled, plastic signs are put into snowbanks to give advance warning/request to minimize interference from parked vehicles. [see sample declaration in Attachment 6]

A 'Significant Weather Event' under the Provincial regulation, and a 'Major Snowstorm Condition' under the Municipal Code may be issued sequentially or simultaneously. These declarations are accompanied by communications to residents to use extra caution on roads, bike lanes and sidewalks, to avoid unnecessary travel until the declaration is lifted, and that it will take longer than usual to restore the facilities to the expected condition. Vehicles found parked on snow routes under a Major Snowstorm Condition will be towed at the owner's expense.

The City currently has dedicated snow removal equipment at its disposal between in-house equipment and by contractors. Although these vehicles rarely see full deployment, they are available as assurance that a certain level of snow removal can take place when major snow events occur. The amount of equipment the City owns is thought to be a reasonable balance between recovering the infrastructure in a timely manner and avoiding equipment sitting unused over the course of its lifespan. A larger on-hand fleet of snow removal equipment will increase annual costs of the winter maintenance program, with the only benefit being some possibility of restoring infrastructure a few days earlier after large storms, which may happen only rarely.

Currently the city has three top priorities defined for snow removal:

- a) Snow Routes and major arterials providing access to hospitals, fire stations, ambulance sites, police stations and emergency communications centres.
- b) TTC bus stops, sidewalks, cycling network and access to major schools.
- c) Deployment of auxiliary staff and equipment to 'hot spots' such as stuck buses, equipment and vehicles blocking roadways, and access to high priority sites.

Under its current Major Snow Event Response Plan, Transportation Services has 7 day, 14 day and 28 day snow removal plan options in place to remove snow, based on what is feasible to complete within those respective timeframes after a major storm. These plans are more than 10 years old. Each tier of work is defined by removal of snow from certain types of infrastructure across the entire city (e.g. all arterial roads), with infrastructure identified as highest priority being completed in the 7-day plan, and lower priority following in 14 and 28 days respectively.

Enhancements to Major Snow Event Response Plan

Since the 2022 and 2023 storms, Transportation Services staff have reviewed practices and hired an external consultant (HDR) to conduct a review of protocols for responding to Major Snow Events. HDR also conducted a review of best practices in other jurisdictions. In addition, the Toronto Accessibility Advisory Committee (TAAC), at its meeting on February 22, 2022, made specific requests which were adopted by Council. As a result of the HDR work and the TAAC requests, staff implemented the following improvements in preparation for the 2023-2024 snow season:

1. Earlier preparation and release of communications to the public regarding weather forecasts, the probability of a major storm and that snow clearing and removal may take longer than usual.
2. Template declarations for Significant Weather Events and Major Snowstorm Conditions.
3. Protocols for providing proactive communications to Councillors about the window of time within which they can expect certain parts of their wards to have snow plowing and, when required, snow removal.
4. A new 311 protocol to suspend snow-clearing and snow-removal related Service Requests via 311 during active winter operations in order to prevent ad hoc service requests from disrupting the city-wide snow clearing and removal strategy.
5. A new type of 311 emergency service request for the public that will only be available in the period when regular snow clearing requests are suspended. Such requests will be screened against urgent health and safety criteria, and forwarded if they meet the criteria. This emergency request type is NOT to address situations that require police, fire or ambulance response.
6. A new Councillors-only escalation email address for situations that meet established criteria tied to protection of public safety.
7. New prioritization for accessibility related service requests.
8. Communication to the public about the reasons for the 311 service request suspension, and providing alternatives to 311 for obtaining information about the status of their snow clearing, such as the PlowTO website and interactive map.
9. Update of the PlowTO website to include not only street plowing and salting, but also sidewalk and bicycle lane service completion.

Early, honest, and on-going communication about expected snowfall and anticipated times to clear and remove snow allows individuals the opportunity to plan and respond to heavy snow conditions, which reflects the reality of living in a winter city. Adjusting local and regional travel plans and proactively removing vehicles parked on snow routes or other on-street locations are some of the ways the public can mitigate the degree to which they are personally impacted by the storm and assist the City in expediting snow clearing and removal.

As it turned out, the 2023-24 season was particularly mild, with the largest storm accumulating less than 10cm of snow. Nonetheless, City staff were prepared to implement the measures listed above. Major snow event preparation was undertaken in January when a large storm was predicted, but then halted when the forecast changed to a much lower accumulation of snow.

TAAC also recommended that Transportation Services develop a public education campaign to inform property owners, business operators, residents, landlords and tenants about the City's winter maintenance strategy and to inform the public about service levels and provide operational updates before, during and after winter storms. The campaign approach had a modern look and feel to engage with the public on a variety of media platforms; with a focus on drivers and people cycling. The objectives of the campaign were to enhance the public's understanding of when and how winter maintenance services are delivered, educate residents about their roles and responsibilities to keep road and sidewalks safe and passible, and align the public's

expectations about snow clearing timelines for all types of snow events with the City's capacity to deliver snow clearing. Methods included a combination of direct mailers, CP24 banners, out of home advertising, and digital and social ads. Materials were available in a variety of languages and formats to address the diverse needs of Toronto's residents.

Next Steps

Work is underway on the next iteration of the Major Snow Event Response Plan. The goal of this next update is to provide greater clarity and detail, building on the improvements implemented for the 2023-24 season. It is the intention of Transportation Services to update this plan regularly to reflect the changing infrastructure and circumstances in the City.

The next update will ensure consistent application of the lenses of accessibility, equity, Vision Zero and Net Zero transportation needs when reviewing prioritization strategies to recover right of way infrastructure from a major snow event and ensure the access to essential goods and services for all Torontonians and visitors. Application of these lenses will address TAAC's February 2022 request for a "proactive accessibility service standard". It will create a new prioritization strategy for major snowstorm operations that account for the impacts on emergency services, TTC and GO Transit services, pedestrian accessibility, and bike lanes.

More specifically, the plan will:

- i) enhance focus on sidewalks to provide accessibility and support transit use (as every transit trip requires some pedestrian travel);
- ii) account for the increased kilometres of bike lanes including physically separated bike lanes;
- iii) clearing snowbanks in key areas such as streetcar stops (which have increased in length due to higher capacity streetcars with multi-door boarding);
- iv) school bus loading zones. It will consider how snow removal should be phased to prioritize roads with little existing snow storage capacity, recognizing that larger roads and those with boulevards have more capacity for temporary snow storage;
- v) updating by-laws to enable earlier declaration of Major Snowstorm Conditions.
- vi) consider how the City of Toronto will best optimize the resources and capacity of the winter contractors and in-house staff to ensure an efficient, timely and effective response to a major snow event.

Consultation on this Major Snow Event Response Plan will be conducted with interest groups across the City, with a focus on city-wide community interest groups representing vulnerable road users. The Toronto Accessibility Advisory Committee will receive a presentation and opportunity to provide feedback at its meeting on May 6, 2024. Going forward, this type of engagement will occur regularly to ensure that iterative updates of the plan reflect the evolving needs of the infrastructure and of residents of Toronto.

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1:

Table of Winter Maintenance Activation by Activity Type

Attachment 2:

Snow Clearing Level of Service Tables

Attachment 3:

Comparison of Snow Clearing Levels of Service (City of Toronto vs Province of Ontario)

Attachment 4:

Winter Services Phased Operation Plan & Service Level Tables

Attachment 5:

Sample Declaration of Significant Weather Event (Provincial O.Reg 612/06)

Attachment 6:

Sample Declaration of Major Snow Storm Condition