

Response to Council Directions on Sidewalk Clearing Requirements and the Status of Modernizing PlowTO

Date: November 21, 2025

To: Infrastructure and Environment Committee

From: Deputy City Manager, Infrastructure Services

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report responds to a request from City Council to report on a plan to require select private property owners to clear the municipal sidewalk abutting their property, and to provide a status on modernizing PlowTO. This report also responds to a request from the Infrastructure and Environment Committee for information regarding moving snow from private property onto public property.

Under City of Toronto bylaws, private property owners are required to clear snow and ice from municipal sidewalks where the City has not assumed the responsibility. Under the City's current levels of service for sidewalk snow clearing, the City begins clearing snow from sidewalks once snow accumulation reaches 2 cm. Shifting the responsibility for the clearing of snow and ice from municipal sidewalks to corporate owners would be challenging, as outlined in this report, and may have the unintended consequence of reducing, rather than improving, sidewalk accessibility during winter events.

City of Toronto bylaws also prohibit pushing, plowing, or otherwise moving snow from private property onto City roadways (including cycling infrastructure), sidewalks, and laneways. The City's winter communications strategy will encourage residents and businesses to voluntarily help keep sidewalks clear, while also reinforcing that snow must not be moved onto City property.

For PlowTO, Transportation Services, together with the Technology Services division, have taken steps to address reporting issues identified during the February 2025 major snow event. This resulted in inaccuracies in sidewalk plow locations being displayed on PlowTO. This has now been rectified, and testing has shown that sidewalk plows are now properly linked to PlowTO to provide accurate location updates. In addition, operational procedures are now in place to clarify plowing or salting for combination equipment to distinguish activities on the map.

Alongside improved winter maintenance public communication initiatives, staff are also exploring operational and technology opportunities to enhance PlowTO so that the public has clearer, more complete information on winter maintenance activity and when service can generally be expected.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Deputy City Manager, Infrastructure Services recommends that:

1. Infrastructure and Environment Committee receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial impacts resulting from the recommendations in this report.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the Financial Impact Section as presented in this report.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on November 12 and 13, 2025, City Council directed the City Manager, in consultation with the Deputy City Manager, Infrastructure Services, to report to the Infrastructure and Environment Committee regarding plans to require corporate property owners to clear the municipal sidewalk abutting their property and an update on how the City is modernizing PlowTO.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.EX27.2>

At its meeting on February 27, 2025, the Infrastructure and Environment Committee directed the General Manager, Transportation Services, to report to the Infrastructure and Environment Committee with a plan to restore responsibility of corporate property owners to clear snow and ice from municipal sidewalks abutting their property. The Committee also directed the General Manager, Transportation Services, to report on the same as part of the 2025 Annual Winter Maintenance report, including responsibilities regarding moving snow onto City streets.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.IE19.12>

COMMENTS

Clearing Municipal Sidewalks Abutting Private Property

Chapter 719, Snow and Ice Removal, of the Toronto Municipal Code outlines the responsibility for clearing snow and ice from municipal sidewalks and private property. Section 719-2 states that it is the responsibility of private property owners and occupants to clear the municipal sidewalk abutting their property of snow and ice within 12 hours of the end of snowfall; however, a 1999 bylaw amendment exempted owners and occupants from this obligation where the City clears the sidewalk in accordance with City policy. The City's levels of service for winter maintenance and the provisions for winter maintenance services on sidewalks have changed over time. Under the City's current levels of service, sidewalk clearing begins after 2 cm of snow accumulation.

Up to and including the 2020–2021 winter season, the City did not provide sidewalk clearing services on all sidewalks. Mechanical clearing was only provided where certain conditions were met, including a minimum sidewalk width of 1.5 m, no immediately adjacent parked vehicles, no obstructions that could be easily damaged or could damage equipment, and only where mechanical clearing was feasible. This left approximately 1,230 km of sidewalks where private property owners remained responsible for clearing snow. In June 2021, City Council approved the expansion of the City's mechanical sidewalk winter maintenance service to the remaining sidewalks that were not previously receiving this service.

Operational Implications of Shifting Responsibility

Shifting the responsibility for sidewalk clearing to certain private property owners and not others presents several operational challenges. Many streets include a mix of property types and uses. This would create operational inefficiencies and result in inconsistent service levels along the same block, where a pedestrian may be travelling from a cleared section to an uncleared one. If responsibility varies by property, inconsistent clearing could create accessibility barriers for people with mobility challenges. Enforcement would further compound these challenges, as the City would need to actively monitor compliance.

The City begins clearing sidewalks of snow once 2 cm of accumulation is reached, and a full round of sidewalk plowing typically takes approximately 12 hours to complete. If private property owners retained the existing 12-hour compliance window, City crews would likely reach many locations before private owners are required to do so, resulting in a mismatch between when the City would clear a sidewalk and when a private owner could legally wait to clear it. This creates uncertainty over expectations during the first several hours after a snowfall, and inconsistent service levels depending on when each party completes their clearing.

Limitations of Ownership- or Use-Based Approaches

City Council directed staff to explore possible adjustments to the current bylaw, including whether “corporate property owners” could be made responsible for clearing the municipal sidewalk abutting their property. Assigning responsibility based on whether a property owner is a “corporate property owner” poses significant practical and administrative challenges. The term is not defined in the Municipal Code or zoning bylaw, and zoning is based on land use, not ownership type. On streets with similar uses, this approach could create inequities – for example, two comparable storefronts

could face different obligations solely because one is corporately owned. Enforcement would also become more complex, as staff would need to verify not only whether a sidewalk was cleared in time, but also the nature of ownership. Linking service obligations to ownership type would likely result in inconsistent, inequitable, and difficult-to-manage results.

As part of this review, staff explored other ways to determine which properties might reasonably be assigned this responsibility. Staff considered whether zoning classifications could be used; however, this approach is not viable because actual land use does not always align with zoning classifications – for example, certain commercial uses may be permitted on land zoned residential.

Consideration was also given to assigning responsibility based on land use, such as requiring properties with commercial uses to clear abutting municipal sidewalks. However, the operational challenges described earlier would continue to apply. A property responsible for clearing the municipal sidewalk may be situated next to one that is not, resulting in inconsistent clearing.

Plowing Snow Onto Public Property

Shoveling, pushing, or plowing snow from private property onto City sidewalks, roadways (including cycling infrastructure), and laneways, is prohibited under Chapter 719 of the Municipal Code. These rules are intended to maintain safe and accessible pedestrian and vehicle routes. Enforcement is primarily complaint-driven; however, officers also monitor locations where there is a known history of plow-out activity or repeated issues. Property owners may first receive a courtesy notice reminding them of their obligations. Follow-up inspections are conducted, and if snow has been improperly deposited onto City property, by-law officers may issue a formal notice. The current fine for moving snow or ice from private property onto City property is \$610.00 (inclusive of a \$110.00 victim surcharge).

Enforcement can be challenging, particularly when snow is moved onto a City road or sidewalk after the City has already cleared it. Officers must confirm that snow originated from private property, which can be difficult without direct observation. Snow accumulation on sidewalks may also result from City plowing activities, complicating the assumption that every pile came from private property.

Promoting Community Support in Winter Maintenance

As part of the City's winter communications strategy, residents and businesses will be encouraged to assist with clearing sidewalks. While the City remains responsible for mechanical sidewalk clearing once the threshold is reached, timely clearing by property owners can improve walkability, reduce icy conditions, and support safe access for people with mobility challenges, transit riders, and all pedestrians.

Communications will emphasize that voluntary action can make a meaningful difference, while also reminding property owners that snow should not be shoveled, pushed, or plowed onto City sidewalks, roads, or cycling infrastructure.

Messaging will be delivered through the City's website, social media channels, and Councillor communications materials to reinforce how property owners can contribute to safer neighbourhoods and improved pedestrian safety.

PlowTO

PlowTO is a public-facing winter operations map that shows when areas of the city were most recently serviced; it is designed for public awareness and is separate from the internal systems used to monitor contractor performance. Introduced during the 2016–2017 winter season, PlowTO has become a popular tool for the public to monitor salting and plowing in their neighbourhood during winter events. The map received more than 230,000 views during the 2024–2025 winter season, demonstrating strong public interest in real-time information on winter maintenance activity.

PlowTO leverages vehicle location data to track the movement of winter equipment across the city during a winter event. The tool provides a view of recent activity in near-real time by displaying where salters and plows servicing road, sidewalk, and cycling infrastructure have been for different areas of the city. Users can check specific addresses or explore broader regions by zooming in on the map.

Feedback from the public and City Councillors after the February 2025 major snow event revealed opportunities for improvement in PlowTO reporting. For example, intermittent location reporting from in-house sidewalk plows during the storm resulted in an inaccurate depiction of plowing activity in some areas. In other cases, some streets were shown as cleared even though plowing operations were still underway, due to system challenges in differentiating between salting and plowing when the same equipment performs both functions.

Staff have taken steps to address both issues for the current 2025-2026 winter season. In-house sidewalk plow route information has been updated in PlowTO to provide accurate location updates, and operational procedures are being implemented so that the map accurately reflects whether combination equipment is salting or plowing is accurately reflected on the map.

More broadly, other opportunities exist to enhance PlowTO. For example, the map offers a snapshot of recent activity rather than a comprehensive view of all winter maintenance work during a winter event. Services from specialized equipment (such as windrow and bus stop plowing) are not included, and the platform currently shows past equipment locations, but does not provide information on upcoming routes. Additionally, snow removal operations are not reflected on the map. Alongside improved winter maintenance public communication initiatives, staff are exploring operational and technology opportunities to provide clearer, more complete information through

PlowTO, including better visibility into recent activity and expected service timing. An update on progress and changes implemented will be included in the 2026 Annual Winter Maintenance Report.

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SIGNATURE

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