

Anchorage city workers battle snow-pile rule-breaking

As snow piles up, more residents are pushing it where it doesn't belong.

DEVIN KELLY ALASKA DISPATCH NEWS



LOREN HOLMES / Alaska Dispatch News Municipal right of way enforcement officer Charlie Eliassen clears snow from in front of a senior citizen's mailbox in South Anchorage on Tuesday.



Photos by LOREN HOLMES / Alaska Dispatch News John Snelson, the Municipality of Anchorage's Right of Way Enforcement lead, documents a basketball hoop that is encroaching into the road right of way near Dimond Boulevard on Tuesday. The hoop is affecting snow removal activities.



Snelson writes a citation for the basketball hoop violation.

Charlie Eliassen had just dug out an elderly resident's mailbox with his city-issued plow truck when an SUV pulled up beside him.

Two men sat in the front seat of the SUV. They had spotted Elias-sen and his supervisor, with their Municipality of Anchorage trucks and flashing yellow and

blue lights, and wanted to complain. Someone in the neighborhood, they said, was pushing snow from his driveway up the road and into the mailboxes and snow piles of neighbors.

“He gave everybody some!” the driver said.

“Is it legal if I shoot him?” his passenger growled.

“Shoot him with a camera,” Eli-assen said with a straight face. He’s heard a lot in more than 10 years enforcing city laws for snow removal.

In a big-snow Anchorage winter, a lean band of right-of-way enforcement officers chips away at the daily influx of calls, complaints and snow-pile rule-breaking.

Eliassen and his fellow officers plow out mailboxes for people who are elderly, disabled or injured, warn or fine businesses and homeowners who push snow from parking lots onto public sidewalks, and investigate reports of rogue snowplowers. They’ve lately been knocking on doors, asking people to move cars before a city plow comes through — a city snow blower rolled over and damaged a car buried under a snow berm in January.

With public resources stretched thin, these officers also wage battle against private property owners who push snow illegally into streets and other public rights-of-way, which they say hamstrings snow removal operations, tacks on costs and creates safety hazards.

Cuts to state and local maintenance budgets slowed snow-hauling operations this winter. The city cut about half a million dollars from its snow maintenance budget, as Mayor Ethan Berkowitz directed more money to hiring police officers. The state of Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, meanwhile, has seen a \$7.8 million drop over two years for winter maintenance in the region that includes Anchorage. The state has responsibility for most major arteries in the city.

Government officials hoped for another warm winter. But nearly 3 feet of snow fell in January, whipping up a barrage of complaints about the state of the roads.

On his Twitter feed, Berkowitz has started posting updates about snow clearing. The state DOT's winter maintenance shop has two people answering complaints on the phone.

Thousands of homeowners and businesses have been digging out too. There are rules for doing it. In commercial and industrial areas, businesses are supposed to keep sidewalks clear and not push snow into the street or the strip of land dedicated to public use. In residential areas, homeowners aren't required to plow sidewalks, but can't push driveway snow into the street or culde-sacs.

This year, those rules have been widely disregarded, officials said. After several warm winters, people seem to be forgetting what not to do.

When a citizen complaint is filed online, it goes straight to John Snelson, the lead of the right-of-way enforcement division. Snelson assigns the call to one of his small crew of officers. Each covers a geographic area, like a cop on a beat. In the summer, the team will work construction inspections, but winter is largely taking up chasing calls about snow.

Snelson is originally from Mississippi and came to Alaska with the Navy. He still speaks with a bit of a drawl. He has worked for the city for 17 years. Driving down state-maintained Dowling Road earlier this week, Snelson gestured to the side of the road. Some businesses appeared to have pushed snow out of private parking lots and into the sidewalk, which isn't allowed.

"There should be a sidewalk there," Snelson said. Since it's a state road, the city seldom enforces the rules, but sometimes officers will take action if they catch a business owner in the act, Snelson said.

The state of Alaska was also using the sidewalk for snow storage. In general, Snelson said, he's noticed cutbacks to the state DOT's snowplowing operations.

"Drive down Northern Lights and Benson," Snelson said, referencing two state-maintained roads. "It doesn't look like they've even plowed yet."

State and city maintenance workers want to do a good job, Snelson said. But there's a list of priorities and a lot of snow. Sometimes things get left out.

In a commercial area off East Dowling Road, Snelson stopped outside of the truck yard of a roofing contractor. Snow piled up near the fence blocked the view of a stop sign. Snelson took a photo on his smartphone.

Snelson reads snow like a hunter reads animal tracks. He says he can tell, for instance, whether a state grader shoved the snow into berms, or if it was a private plow using a front-end loader.

Citations can run up to \$1,000 per violation for encroaching on land dedicated to public uses. But a fine is a last resort, Snelson said. The main goal is education.

In a residential neighborhood off Arctic Boulevard, Snelson spotted a basketball hoop to the left of a driveway.

“Basketball encroachment hindering snow maintenance,” Snelson typed briskly into the computer in his truck.

He checked the “to-do” list for the enforcement officers. In a South Anchorage neighborhood, an older resident had asked for help digging out a mailbox.

Eliassen was on the call. Snelson drove over to meet him.

With his yellow and blue lights flashing, Eliassen backed up his truck and pushed the plow against the berm beneath the mailbox.

“You’ve got to break it up a little bit,” Eliassen shouted through the open window of the truck.

Eliassen had spent his day “investigating silliness,” as he put it. Before Snelson met him, Eliassen was talking to homeowners who had bought a house in 2015 and hadn’t seen a snowy winter until this one. The homeowners used an all-terrain vehicle to push out snow, but quickly ran out of driveway space and ended up pushing snow into the road.

“Now they know they can’t do that anymore,” Eliassen said. Pushing snow from private property into the street or public space can be a \$300 fine. A homeowner should plan where the snow will go before it snows, he said.

Eliassen, 54, is tall with a graying beard and a wry sense of humor. He grew up in Chugiak-Eagle River and lives in Peters Creek. He has little patience for mailboxes on the left side of a driveway, snow in the middle of cul-de-sacs and people who don't look out for their neighbors.

He recalled that one time, someone emptied a hot tub near the road in subzero temperatures. The water ran down the curb and emptied into the storm drains, which could freeze and cause problems during the next storm.

As Eliassen and Snelson talked, the SUV pulled up beside them. The men in the front seat told them about the rogue snowplower in their neighborhood, pushing snow to other neighbors.

As the SUV drove away, Snelson said, "Just let 'em vent."

"I was actually a bartender at one point, so I was a professional counselor," Eliassen said. "It comes in handy."

He and Snelson hear plenty of complaints about tax dollars and snow removal. People see the narrow roads bermed up with snow. But they don't see the wall-to-wall schedules of the street maintenance crews that respond, Eliassen said.

"These guys haven't had a day off in weeks," Eliassen said. "They respond to everything. People don't realize that."

Eliassen keeps yellow and pink sheets in his car. The sheets, which include the word "Notice" and Elias-sen's phone number and email, contain information and diagrams about removing snow from private property. The sheets also detail laws against pushing snow from driveways into the street or into the middle of a cul-de-sac.

Taxes aren't supposed to pay for removing that snow, though that's commonly misunderstood, Eliassen said.

On a regular day, he hands out the yellow ones. If he really wants to get someone's attention, "I'll flame 'em with pink." Once Eliassen drove into a neighborhood and came to a complete stop. Someone had used a snowblower to move snow from a driveway into the middle of the road. It seemed obvious where the snow came from.

Eliassen used his plow to push all the snow into the person's front yard. Then he plastered notices on three walls of the house.

It was a blunt way to send this message: "We all live here. Be nice to each other," Eliassen said.

"And take care of your snow."

Contact Devin Kelly at dkelly@alaskadispatch.com.