

Last week's snow storm worse than expected

By Bill Rea

The snowfall last week was expected, but things were a lot heavier than had been anticipated.

But Caledon's Director of Public Works David Loveridge maintains things in town were handled as well as possible.

Loveridge offered a report to Town councillors Tuesday, calling it a "perfect storm," if it was aimed at catching the area off guard.

He said the forecasts that had been issued all day last Wednesday (Dec. 10) had called for four to eight centimetres, and the projections that fall would come between 3 a.m. and noon Thursday. Crews tried to get a jump on things by pre-salting and pre-wetting roads, starting at about 11 p.m. Wednesday.

By 5 a.m. Thursday, he said it was a case of "all hands on deck," with 22 operators and mechanics who were qualified to operate the equipment. As well, the Town had private contractors lined up to offer support.

"We figured we had it covered," he said, pointing out the Town had 26 pieces of equipment on the road from 5 a.m. to 5 p.m.

They included 22 plows and four graders and front-end loaders.

A big problem he said they encountered was with the length of the storm, which went a lot longer than had been anticipated. And according to Provincial regulations, crews can only be on the job for a maximum of 12 hours. That has to be followed by 12 hours of rest. He added he could have declared an emergency and had crews work another two hours, but that would have been the maximum, and would have had to be followed by 12 hours off.

"In this case, it wouldn't have helped much," he remarked.

Progress of the storm unexpectedly stalled, and "we became sort of the polar express," Loveridge said.

By 5 p.m., he had to get the crews off the roads, and there were no resources, apart from the contractors, until the 11 p.m. shift came on.

Loveridge also told councillors that they gave priority to the main roads, meaning they had to be cleared before cul-de-sacs in subdivisions.

Some roads were addressed, but he pointed out that snow was falling at a rate of about 1.5 centimetres per hour, meaning after just a few hours, there would have been little sign that any plow had been through.

Loveridge said he was able to get his crews back by 5 a.m. Friday, and things were under control by the middle of the afternoon.

Dealing with such situations is governed by the Province, through Minimum Maintenance Standards (MMS). Loveridge said the Town met the MMS requirements, but agreed it might not have lived up to the demands or expectations of many Caledon residents.

"I think the public works crews did an amazing job over those three days," he said, adding that according to the industry average, the Town should have 38 operators for the number of kilometres it's responsible for.

He also said they learned from the experience, adding there are plans to change the deployment of equipment for the next storm. He said there were only four pieces of equipment operating in Bolton, when there should have been eight.

A couple of councillors observed that redeployment will mean equipment will have to be removed from some other area of town.

"I don't think we expected the storm that we had," Councillor Annette Groves commented, adding the experience gave the Town the chance to see what it got right and what needs to be improved.

She also wondered if there could be some kind of arrangement with the local school boards and Caledon Community Services (CCS) to get students in need of their volunteer hours to help knock down snow banks and windrows (banks of snow left by plows that block driveways).

Loveridge told her windrows are a problem all over. He said it might be possible to set up a program to deal with them for seniors, although he said it might be expensive. He was also concerned about bringing in volunteer labour, considering liability and training issues, but he didn't rule out the possibility of something being set up through CCS.

Councillor Nick deBoer said he got a lot of calls from people complaining about delays in getting roads in estate areas like Cedar Mills plowed.

Councillor Johanna Downey said she didn't get many calls, but was concerned that people got tickets when they parked on the roads because their driveways were blocked.

Loveridge said that's an issue across town, with residents interfering with snow removal. He said it's a team sport, and all have to work together. He also pointed out that if a car is parked on the street, the plow has to go around it, and that creates another windrow.

Councillor Gord McClure said he received few complaints, and when residents called him, he assured them the crews were doing their best and to be patient.

Councillor Jennifer Innis said she got a number of complaints from Mono Mills, with some people saying it took 24 hours to get their streets plowed. Loveridge said he'd follow up on that. He didn't agree with the 24-hour figure, but observed that if someone had to wait a long time to get out, it might seem like 24 hours.

Councillor Rob Mezzapelli commented that the town might have to look at enhanced service, although it will be expensive. 'There's no cost to having the conversation,' he said, pointing out the population is aging.



Snow clearing equipment and crews put in very long hours because of the length of last week's storm. Photo by Bill Rea