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Snow Removal Strategy - *It's Snow Joke*

*Blades are down, augers are turning;
Snow's on the ground and throwers are churning.
Ice will thaw and water will freeze;
Residents will fall on hands and knees.
Concrete breaks and pavement buckles;
Tenants fall and break their knuckles.*

Winter is a time when maintenance priorities shift to ensuring clean and dry streets, drives and walks. Does your plan for snow and ice removal services reflect a loss control strategy? Or is your process merely a cost/price negotiation?

One of the leading costs of liability expenses are claims for injuries that result from slip and fall accidents. The number of residential slip and fall injuries increases dramatically during icy months. Are you taking *reasonable* care and caution – regular and thorough efforts - to keep surfaces clear of snow and ice? Read on ...

Winter 2008-2009 is already showing signs of starting earlier, with some areas already reporting record snowfall. More snow has already led to parking lots and drives being packed with plowed snow. The need for more frequent plowing will over-extended many snow removal budgets.

Another factor is that salt is in short supply this year. Sanding is now being considered as an alternative to salting. Some contractors are re-pricing contracts to reflect higher costs and they are making the new contract a requirement for continued services. These changed contracts may reflect additional plowing visits, fluctuating fuel costs, and an increased salt price. Any revised contract language should still reflect your strategy as to when and how plowing, salting and/or sanding will occur. Unexpected or dramatic changes in contract terms should be reviewed by a competent attorney.

Amid these and other changing factors, your burden of *reasonableness* remains constant.

One of the elements of reasonableness, when it comes to snow removal, is the proximity of removal to the actual snowfall. Ideally snow will be removed as soon as practical after the snowfall. Your maintenance crews should report any need for extra plowing and removal services as reasonably necessary to maintain dry surfaces.

Another element of reasonableness is thoroughness. When your contracted crew finishes their job, have your maintenance crew inspect that the job met your expectations. If not, notify the contractor's office and have them return to complete the assignment. If unsafe conditions exist, have your crew finish the snow and/or ice removal as best as they can, then address this with your contractor as appropriate.

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To establish reasonableness as part of your strategy, think out what you are trying to accomplish by snow removal. Then articulate your plan to your contractor. Your plan should cover such items as where to push plowed snow; how to clear the area around and to ensure a path to the dumpsters; how you expect them to maintain access to gates, walkways, fire hydrants, emergency exits, laundry facilities, the rental office and club houses. Clear pathways for postal workers and other delivery drivers. Another often unstated expectation is that your street drains will be clear of snow and ice. Proper drainage is almost as important as clearing the snow itself. A significant snow melt followed by a hard freeze will cause icy conditions. Specify clear drains as a requirement of your plowing service.

When inspecting for snow removal, pay particular attention to parking areas. Not only is resident access to their vehicles important, but providing relatively safe footing when entering and exiting vehicles is also critical.

When establishing your schedule for removal services, be sure to address “special needs” concerns. Is there a property in your portfolio where the resident mix is comprised primarily of active seniors? Do you have a complex where school aged children walk to school buses or through a fence gate to a local school? Is there a handicapped child or young adult that needs cleared access to sidewalks and streets? Do children walk your driveways, parking lots and sidewalks to and from school buses? Such a facility may need priority scheduling for snow removal services.

You might schedule snow removal for a facility with open parking ahead of a facility with parking garages or covered parking. Other special needs may be taken into consideration as part of a defined and defensible strategy for scheduling and prioritizing your snow removal services. Be certain also to ensure that your contractor has enough resources – equipment, trucks, plows, drivers, etc. to meet your needs during peak periods.

Determine which surfaces the contractor will hand or machine shovel, and which you will clear with your maintenance staff?”

Once you have assigned or assumed responsibility, communicate those to your local maintenance crews and ensure they have the resources to support your strategy. Maintain a contractor’s snow removal activity log just as you record the activities of your own crews. Be mindful of your contractor’s failure to appear. Record your efforts to reach your contractor to get them to your site.

Plan your snow removal priorities; clearly articulate them in your snow removal contract. You can show that you had a loss control strategy.