

Sidewalk snowplows damage lawns

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City staff says it will stick with the current sidewalk snowplow equipment despite residents' complaints about damage caused by the Bobcat.

"When I'm sitting in my living room at night and I hear the snowplow coming, I immediately jump up and look out the window to see what they are doing," says Aline Bourgeois, who lives in the North End.

She says the sound of the Bobcat — a small, front-end loader used for sidewalk clearing in parts of the municipality — has been getting on her nerves lately.

It started two weeks ago, when Bourgeois found that the sidewalk plow had peeled a large piece of wood off the retaining wall in front of her house.

"I also noticed the shrubs that I planted right next to the sidewalk were run over, and were moved down with the snow into another section."

This is the first year the Halifax Regional Municipality has looked after snow removal from sidewalks on the Halifax peninsula.

But there have already been more than 550 complaints as of Jan. 14, according to data from the city. Most of the complaints focused on property damage or

the poor quality of snow clearing.

Jennifer Watts, councillor for the Peninsula North district where Bourgeois lives, says the damage has been caused by "a whole bunch of issues."

"Sometimes in the middle of the storm, when the Bobcat is going down, it's really hard to see where the sidewalk is. Sometimes it will be icy and (the Bobcat) will slip, maybe that day the driver wasn't being as careful as they need to be."

However, Ann Fenety, who lives in the South End, believes the problem is that the city is using the wrong equipment.

"It is too wide for the sidewalks," she says.

"In our neighbourhood, every house is close to the sidewalk and the reason is the houses were built long before the sidewalks were. The sidewalks are squeezed between the houses. So the drivers of these big plows, they have a choice of hitting a house or hitting a tree, so they have to weave back and forth."

Fenety says the Bobcat is a bad choice for plowing, too.

"The dumper at the front is pushing down snow, what it leaves behind is about one-inch thick compressed snow, and to make matters worse they don't add any salt."

Despite these concerns, Watts says city staff decided at a meeting

last Friday that the Bobcat is "an appropriate piece of equipment to be used to clear the snow." There's no plan to switch to smaller machines.

Watts says she has been receiving phone calls and emails from residents. Some like the service but would like it to be improved; others, who just don't want the service, believe it will never meet the standard of hand shoveling.

Watts says the decision for the city to clean up the sidewalks on the peninsula, like it's been doing in other parts of the city, was narrowly approved by city council last April.

She says the decision was passed in the middle of the budget debate, without proper consultation with the residents.

Watts didn't vote for the move and believes hand shoveling does a better and faster job.

According to Watts, an average household in the North End pays about \$35 a year through taxes for the sidewalk snow clearing service.

Bourgeois says she's angry with the mess made by the plows.

"I called 311 (municipal services) last week. I also took pictures (of the damage). They gave me a work order/reference number, which I wrote down. And they said the city staff will come and assess the damages in three weeks."



The sod in front of Aline Bourgeois' house has been uprooted by snowplows clearing the city's sidewalks. (Photo by Chengcheng Shen)

HOW TO DEAL WITH DAMAGE:

Councillor Jennifer Watts says residents should take pictures of any damage to their property and call the citizen service centre number, 311, to report the date and location of the damage.

City staff will go through the reports in the spring and snow clearing contractors will have until June to repair the damage.

However, she says if the damage is to a fence or wall encroaching on the sidewalk, there may not be full compensation. "HRM and the contractor," she says, "would not be responsible for something not on private property."

Literacy day giveaway encourages reading

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With a smile on her face, Leslie Dunn dishes out armfuls of books from a mountain of boxes stacked in the main foyer of the Halifax Stanfield International Airport.

"I want to get books into kids' hands and, remember, they're free," Dunn called out as volunteers hurried to both ends of the terminal.

Dunn, executive director of the Dartmouth Learning Network, helped organize Books Take Flight, a giveaway held this week to celebrate Family Literacy Day, an annual initiative started 16 years ago to promote reading and writing.

In partnership with First Book Canada, a non-profit organization that has given out millions of books to families throughout Canada and the United States, Dunn and an army of network



Kiera Breen, left, and Gina Rideout stop by Books Take Flight to pick up reading material on their way to St. John's. (Photo by Tyler LeBlanc)

members handed out more than 10,000 new books to arriving and departing passengers throughout the day.

Peter Spurway, vice president of the Halifax International Airport Authority, was contacted

to provide a space for the event through the airport's community outreach program.

"The event was right up our alley," says Spurway. "What's important to the community is important to the airport, like the

literacy program."

The airport's community outreach program has been around since 2005 and is designed to spread awareness about community events. Nearly 16,000 people pass through the terminal every day, says Spurway.

Last Monday, Shauna Houk was on her way to catch a plane to Toronto for a conference when she stopped to pick up a copy of Robert Newton's *Runner* for the flight.

"Sadly, I'm going to miss Family Literacy Day this year; dad will have to step in and read with the kids today," says Houk.

"Kids are still reading, but only online, I think they need a balance between that and a good old book."

Dana Atwell, the network's former chair, says nearly 50 per cent of Canadians do not have a sufficient level of literacy.

"The level is generally below that of a Grade 8 student, if you asked them, for example, to read the *Huffington Post*, they couldn't," says Atwell, referring to

the online news site.

"We are barely meeting the grade internationally."

Established in 1985 by former Nova Scotia premier John Savage, the network aims to increase literacy rates and promote family learning in Nova Scotia.

"We started with a one-on-one learning environment; now we offer eight-person class sessions, as well as general education development programs and family learning sessions," says Dunn.

"Increased literacy leads to increased wealth, increased health and increased success," she says.

The paperbacks handed out at events like Books Take Flight are donated to First Book Canada by the publishers and are distributed to community organizations like the network.

Digging back into the boxes to find more copies of a French book on penguins, the surprise hit of the morning, Dunn agrees with Houk: there's nothing better than a good old book.