



March 25, 2025

Mayor Katjana Ballantyne
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Somerville, MA 02143

In Somerville, we pride ourselves on being a walkable, accessible, and vibrant city. But every winter, our sidewalks become a treacherous obstacle course, hindering residents' mobility and jeopardizing their safety. According to the CDC, 1 million Americans are injured each year due to slips and falls on ice and snow, with a significant portion of these injuries occurring on sidewalks¹. Tragically, 17,000 people die each year from those injuries. On top of safety concerns, snow and ice accumulation hinders walking, biking, and transit operations across Somerville, directly affecting the economic outcome of many residents and local businesses. When sidewalks are impassable due to snow and ice, residents are forced to choose driving over walking or cycling, undermining the City's efforts to promote active transportation and increase public transit ridership. The negative impacts of snow and ice on sidewalks are borne most harshly by the members of our community with disabilities, who must navigate difficult terrain with wheelchairs and other mobility devices or without the ability to see dangerous ice patches.

During the snowfalls of Winter 2024-2025, we found ice on sidewalks up to 7 days after precipitation. We believe this is an unacceptable state of affairs for a city of our size and resources. PTAC understands that snow removal is a shared responsibility between the public and private sectors. We acknowledge and appreciate DPW's critical efforts to clear snow from public sidewalks, bus stops, bike lanes, roadways, and the Community Path. However, we have observed significant delays and inconsistencies in snow removal on sidewalks adjacent to private properties across Somerville. These inconsistencies impact the overall effectiveness of the City's mobility goals for up to a third of each year.

We urge the City to take additional actions to establish a consistent pedestrian and transit experience during and after snowstorms. Ultimately, we would like to see the City make a full recovery 24 hours after snowfall, returning to 100% mobility capacity on sidewalks, transit facilities, bike facilities, the Community Path, and roadways. We offer the following recommendations to achieve that goal, listed in order of priority:

1. **Regulate snow and ice differently:** Ice poses a significantly higher risk of severe falls than snow. We would like to see stricter regulations and additional material and educational resources for ice. We think enforcement for icy sidewalks should start sooner than 4-6 daylight hours after snowfall, and think fines should be higher for icy sidewalks than for snowy ones. We are grateful for DPW's existing pre-treatment efforts and would like to see them expanded, including through incentives to private property owners. We recommend that the City offer property owners free ice melt and widely publicize this opportunity, emphasizing its importance to pedestrian safety.

¹ Danielle, Monica. "How Dangerous Is Winter Weather?" *ABC10* (blog), January 7, 2021.
<https://www.abc10.com/article/weather/accuweather/how-dangerous-is-winter-weather/507-e0a5f7d8-35f9-43c9-97d0-dcb e9f1f5f23>.

2. **Implement stronger snow regulations:** Following the City of Minneapolis's playbook², we recommend: (i) reducing the snow clearing allowance from 6 to 4 daylight hours after snowfall stops; (ii) requiring landowners to shovel the entire sidewalk width instead of just 3 feet; (iii) ensuring landowners shovel snow into their own yard instead of into streets or alleys; and (iv) ensuring the sidewalk has been cleared to bare pavement.
3. **Shift the Sidewalk Snow Clearing Pilot from enforcement to clearance:** For the past few years, the City's Sidewalk Snow Clearing Pilot³ has increased enforcement of private properties and clearance of pedestrian and transit features on Broadway and School St. It has also employed City forces to clear sidewalks adjacent to private properties, but only after the private properties have been ticketed up to 6 hours after snowfall. While we support increased ISD enforcement of properties with unclear sidewalks (see Point 5), we continue to be confused as to why this pilot prioritizes enforcement over clearance. We would much rather see the sidewalks simply cleared by the City in the first place, rather than subject pedestrians to dangerous conditions for 6 hours. We think this shifted goal would put the City on a clearer path towards testing the feasibility of taking full responsibility for sidewalk snow clearing citywide (see Point 13).
4. **Improve public education and outreach:** Currently, the City's public snow-clearing materials tend to focus on what residents should do with their cars⁴. In contrast, the City of Minneapolis emphasizes walkability⁵. We would like to see Somerville make this shift with clearer information about roles and responsibilities for snow clearing, including by communicating the level of expected pedestrian experience. Information should include:
 - a. A detailed presentation of the expected quality of work. For example, photos of acceptable and unacceptable clearing can help clarify what private owners, businesses, and construction zone operators should do.
 - b. Roles and responsibilities, including clarity between the duties of the landlord and tenant and what is available to enforce those duties.
 - c. Information on the treatments, products, and tools that can be used in different situations.
 - d. A guide to available services, including the teen sidewalk snow-clearing program and how to hire and manage professional snow-clearing teams (e.g., liability for poor performance).
5. **Increase enforcement capacity:** Enhance the enforcement of snow-clearing activities by hiring more ISD inspectors. We would like to see ISD inspectors visit every sidewalk in Somerville within 48 hours of the end of snowfall, and return daily to ticketed properties to ensure issues have been resolved.
6. **Ensure bus stops are clear when buses are running:** We would like to see increased coordination between the City and MBTA to guarantee safe access to buses whenever they are running. This alignment will help residents choose public transportation over private vehicles if they need to leave their houses during or immediately after the storm.

² City of Minneapolis. "Sidewalk Snow Clearing Rules." Accessed March 23, 2025.

<https://www.minneapolismn.gov/getting-around/snow/snow-clearing/sidewalk-snow-clearing/>.

³ City of Somerville. "Sidewalk Snow Clearing Pilot." Accessed March 23, 2025.

<https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/programs/sidewalk-snow-clearing-pilot>.

⁴ City of Somerville. "Snow Info: Emergency Policies, Parking Rules, Shoveling Requirements." Accessed March 23, 2025. <https://www.somervillema.gov/snow>.

⁵ City of Minneapolis.

7. **Increase renting landlord responsibilities:** We would like to see landlords take greater responsibility for sidewalk snow clearing, and have City regulations reflect this. For example, we should clarify when and if it is ever appropriate for landlords to shift the responsibility for snow clearance onto their tenants. Non-compliance fines should be higher for renting landlords, and regulations should be in place to ensure these fines don't get passed onto tenants.
8. **Ensure business compliance:** Too often, we see sidewalks outside businesses cluttered with snow piles, uncleared snow, and icy patches. These hazards create dangerous conditions for pedestrians, discourage foot traffic, and hinder economic activity. Businesses must go beyond household clearing responsibilities by ensuring sidewalks are fully free of snow. The City should incentivize business improvement organizations to pool resources to hire professional snow clearance teams, especially to support smaller businesses who may not have the funds to hire such teams themselves.
9. **Ensure construction zone compliance:** The already haphazard condition of temporary walkways, detours, and blocked sidewalks deteriorates further with snow and ice. We recommend that the City clarify and strengthen regulations for pedestrian safety in construction zones during winter conditions. Developers must be held accountable for maintaining safe, clearly marked temporary sidewalks and cleared detours that meet accessibility standards. Non-compliance fines should be higher for developers with active construction zones.
10. **Rethink the approach to minor storms:** While major blizzards trigger immediate action, extended periods of lighter snow can create a treacherous buildup on sidewalks and around bus stops. Because businesses and schools often remain open during these minor storms, pedestrian and public transit traffic is just as heavy as on a regular day. This level of use makes consistent clearing critical. We recommend adjusting the City's regulations to address these extended snowfall events. Instead of solely focusing on accumulation depth, we recommend implementing clearance requirements during prolonged light snow for property owners and City staff.
11. **Identify and implement sidewalk design standards focused on winter weather:** We recommend that the City review options to update its standard sidewalk design to minimize ice formation. This could include improving drainage channels, exploring different materials, and changing grading. We would also love the City to explore heated sidewalks in areas with the highest pedestrian traffic.
12. **Empower a single team to lead on snow clearing:** We recommend stronger high-level management to organize the multiple public departments and private owners involved in snow clearing. A single team should be empowered to lead on the planning, regulatory, educational, and reporting responsibilities required to support a successful snow-clearing program in Somerville.
13. **Explore whether the City could take full sidewalk snow clearing responsibility:** While it is currently not the norm, there are a handful of cities in the U.S. that take full responsibility for sidewalk snow clearing citywide including Rochester, NY (37.17 sq mi) and Burlington, VT (15.49 sq mi)⁶. Meanwhile, Minneapolis, MN (58.4 sq mi) has been studying the feasibility of transitioning to a City clearance model over the past few years, allocating \$600,000 for a municipal sidewalk plowing pilot program in 2023⁷. We recognize that clearing sidewalks is not cheap. The Minneapolis Department of

⁶ Schmitt, Angie. "More Cities Are Taking Responsibility for Clearing Sidewalks of Snow." *Streetsblog USA*, February 21, 2019. <https://usa.streetsblog.org/2019/02/21/more-cities-are-taking-responsibility-for-clearing-sidewalks-of-snow/>.

⁷ Ellefsen, Carly. "What's Happening with Minneapolis Municipal Sidewalk Plowing?" *Our Streets* (blog), June 12, 2024. <https://www.ourstreetsmn.org/2024/06/12/muni-sidewalk-plowing-june-2024-update/>.

Public Works estimates that it would cost \$4.5-6 million to plow all sidewalks 4-5 times per year, and up to \$20 million to plow more frequently at lighter snow levels. We recommend that Somerville conduct a similar study to explore the cost and feasibility of clearing sidewalks throughout the entirety of our 4.2 square miles and consider a tax increase to fund such a program. We believe such a program could allow the City to achieve an economy of scale, reducing overall costs compared to individual efforts to organize contractors. We also believe it would result in a more consistent and thorough winter experience for all people walking and taking transit in Somerville.

We believe a well-executed snow removal program is essential for creating a safe, accessible, and walkable Somerville. We look forward to continued collaboration with City departments to improve conditions for all community members.

Sincerely,

The Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)

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OSPCD Mobility, City of Somerville
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