

**WHATCOM COUNTY  
PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT**

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**MAINTENANCE & OPERATIONS  
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## **Winter Snow and Ice Policy**

*Revised Oct 20, 2023*

Whatcom County Public Works (WCPW) is charged with safely, efficiently, and cost-effectively maintaining reliable access to the County's road system. In order to do this during winter months, WCPW has long-established guidelines for coordinated snow and ice management on all 960 miles of county-maintained roads.

Plowing and application of winter road treatments like sanding and salt brine are prioritized based on several factors. These factors include how much traffic a road receives, if it's a transit or school route, if the road has emergency facilities like police & fire stations, and other similar criteria. This means service on lower-priority roads may be significantly reduced during and after severe snowfall, ice storms, and other winter weather.

Residents are encouraged to prepare in advance for winter storms and stay home for their safety until roads are cleared and safe. The unique climate of Whatcom County can cause extreme weather in one area and relatively no impact in another. Residents should not assume the conditions at their location represent the conditions of the county as a whole.

Snow and ice management is costly and requires an extraordinary amount of human resources. It is one of the largest expenses in the department. Public Works will make every effort to safely, efficiently, and cost-effectively maintain Whatcom County's road transportation system using available resources.

For additional information:

- Visit our winter weather webpage at <http://www.whatcomcounty.us/winteroperations>
- Public Works uses social media to post the most up-to-date information during our winter operations. Follow us on [Facebook](#) and [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#) for updates.
- View road closures & restrictions and the County Travel Planner at <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/952/Road-Closures-Restrictions>
- For community-wide emergencies, the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office (WCSO) Division of Emergency Management (DEM) is an additional information source. Users can sign up under [Notify Me](#) on the Whatcom County website for notifications from DEM.

### **How Priority Levels Are Determined**

A Priority Level (PL) classification is assigned to each public road in the county. The classification intends to provide a level of service that residents can expect throughout the winter based on the type of road. The PL is determined by a combination of:

- Traffic volumes
- Residential and public use, including business, school bus, life/safety, and transit routes.

Priority levels are reviewed periodically as the road's criteria may change, which could then raise or lower the level of service. A map of county roads and their priority levels can be found on our snow and winter weather webpage at <http://www.whatcomcounty.us/winteroperations>.

### **Priority Level Descriptions**

**Priority Level 1 (PL1):** Highest Priority. These are major [arterial](#) and [collector](#) roads that Public Works considers high volume. These roads may include bus routes.

- Travelers should be prepared to drive in conditions of accumulated snow, compact snow, and ice.

**Priority Level 2 (PL2):** Normally, secondary paved roads that serve a functional need for public access, like fire, safety, public transit, or school, but that have less traffic overall than Priority 1 roads.

- PL 2 roads will be plowed after PL1 roads have been plowed and can be maintained.
- Travelers should be prepared to drive in conditions of accumulated snow, compact snow, and ice.

**Priority Level 3 (PL3):** Low-traffic volume roads that may include milk routes or roads leading to higher-density housing areas. \*\*

- PL 3 Roads are plowed only after PL 1 and 2 roads have been completed and can be maintained.
- These roads will not be plowed on a routine schedule.
- Residents should plan for up to seven days without snow removal or management service during extreme conditions.
- Travelers should be prepared to drive in conditions that include accumulated snow, compact snow, and ice.

*\*\* If a Priority Level 3 road is used by a school district or Whatcom Transit Authority as a recognized bus route, it may be maintained at the same level as a Priority 2 road on in-person school days.*

**Priority Level 4 (PL4):** Lower traffic volume roads, developments, cul-de-sacs, single lane, and dead-end roads, including remote areas. These roads are not bus or transit routes. Whatcom County must prioritize its limited snow and ice management resources towards its higher priority roads before committing any winter road maintenance personnel or equipment to PL4 roads.

- PL 4 Roads are plowed only after all other higher priority level roads have been completed and can be maintained.
- These roads will not be plowed on a routine schedule.
- Residents should plan for up to seven days without snow removal or management service during extreme conditions.
- Travelers should be prepared to drive in conditions that include accumulated snow, compact snow, and ice.

## **Situational Policies & Procedures**

Every winter storm is different and presents its own unique challenges. The department works closely with first responders to ensure fire, police, EMS, and utility companies can respond to emergencies when they occur. For example, if the fire department needs access to a specific area, it will be prioritized regardless of the road's original priority level.

Strong northeast winds can cause significant snow drifts on some PL1 roads that demand a larger workforce to maintain. These situations reduce Public Works' snow response elsewhere.

Public Works will not plow a road if employees believe it would be unsafe to do so, regardless of the road's priority level. Safety is always our highest priority.

### **Winter Road Treatments**

Whatcom County uses sand, rock salt, salt/sand mix, and liquid salt brine. Treatments used will be based on the road and weather conditions.

### **Private Roads**

Whatcom County does not provide winter weather services to private roads. Contractors offering snow plowing and other winter services for private roads are listed on websites like Craigslist and Angie's List.

### **Snow Berms, Mailboxes, and Driveways**

Whatcom County receives numerous phone calls during snow events indicating that snow berms left by the plows have blocked access from private roads and driveways onto county roads or mailboxes. During routine snow plowing, the county simply does not have the resources to remove berms and clear driveways and mailboxes. This is the responsibility of the owner or their contractor.

## **Plan Ahead: Know What to Expect and How to Prepare**

### **For your vehicle:**

- Ensure your vehicle is current on all routine maintenance to reduce the chance of breaking down during a winter storm.
- Four-wheel drive, all-wheel drive, or higher clearance vehicles will generally have an easier time on secondary roads.
- Don't abandon your vehicle on county roads unless necessary for safety reasons. Vehicles parked in the roadway can prevent plows from clearing snow and may be damaged.
- Have tire chains or traction tires readily available.
- Keep [emergency winter supplies in your vehicle](#).

### **For your home/driveway:**

- Have food, water, and medical supplies in your home for up to one week. [Read the winter storm preparedness guide from weather.gov](#).
- Check weather reports frequently since forecasts can change.
- Plan ahead for more extended periods of inclement weather than is forecasted, especially for major storms.
- When clearing your driveway and snow berm, please pile the snow to the left side as you face your house, especially as you get closer to the road. This will prevent the county's plow blade from pushing the material you shoveled back into your driveway again.
- Do not put snow on the road. This creates obstructions and hazards to other motorists.

- Park your vehicles in your driveway and off of the road. This helps snowplow operators complete their routes quickly and efficiently. Vehicles parked in the roadway can prevent plows from clearing snow.

If you have questions, comments, or concerns about this snow policy, contact us at 360-778-6400 or email [publicworks@whatcomcounty.us](mailto:publicworks@whatcomcounty.us).

**This policy has been reviewed and approved by:**

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Garrett Reynolds  
Maintenance & Operations Superintendent

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Date

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Elizabeth Kosa  
Public Works Director

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Date