

Michael Halle

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January 26, 1998

To: The Honorable Cambridge City Council
Re: Pedestrian-friendly snow removal

The Honorable Council,

During the last Council meeting of January 12th, 1998, a council order and significant discussion centered around the issue of snow removal. This topic surfaces perennially in New England, with the City of Cambridge being no exception. Two main points were discussed at that meeting:

- Sidewalks are a necessary transportation corridor for pedestrians in the city and must be clear of snow and safe to travel.
- Property owners should be allowed a reasonable amount of time to perform their legal responsibility to clear the sidewalks in front of their homes and businesses, in synchronization with the DPW's efforts to plow the streets.

As a concerned pedestrian of this city, I believe that these two points perpetually will be at odds with each other, and that if Cambridge seriously wishes to be a year-round pedestrian friendly city it must take steps to change how its sidewalks are cleared of snow and ice.

Property owners are currently required to clear the city-owned sidewalks in front of their properties of snow within twelve hours of the end of a given snowfall. It is interesting to imagine the situation if sidewalks and streets were treated equally: even major arterial roads would not be completely clear of snow, and a small number of delinquent owners could prevent travel down whole stretches of roadway. The snow removal process would be inefficient and chaotic; automobile traffic would come to a halt for days. In addition, the burden on property owners to clear city property would be enormous.

Reality stands in sharp contrast to this imaginary spectacle. In Cambridge, the streets are plowed continuously from the time that one half inch of snow has fallen. While DPW crews may take a while to reach smaller side streets, the main arteries of the city are cleared and remain so throughout all but the worst snowstorms. The city's sidewalks, on the other hand, are not dependably clear in most areas during and immediately after a storm, precisely the time when citizens should be encouraged to walk, not drive, to their destinations. It is completely counter to the spirit of the Vehicle Trip Reduction Ordinance that we should force people into their cars on snowy days because they cannot navigate the sidewalks they normally use to get to work, home, or the store. The negative impact on pedestrians can last for days or even weeks during the New England winter. The quality of life for the elderly and the handicapped, who depend heavily on passible sidewalks, is all the more cruelly affected.

Although the consequences of snow-blocked sidewalks are severe, it is neither sufficient nor reasonable to put all the weight of snow clearance on property owners, particularly in residential neighborhoods. Hard-working Cantabridgians have obligations that may prevent them from being at home during the time when a clear sidewalk would benefit pedestrians the most. Many of our elderly citizens are physically unable to shovel snow. Those people without cars find it difficult to move sand or salt to their homes to be used to clear icy sidewalks. Finally, no citizen effort can match the efficiency or completeness of a centrally and professionally planned snow clearance effort.

If the city believes itself more than a fair-weather friend to the pedestrian, it must commit to taking a more active role in maintaining sidewalks as transportation corridors and not just as extensions of front yards. Clearly, however, turning over the responsibility for clearing sidewalks of snow and ice completely to the city would be an enormous and expensive task, one that the city is unlikely to undertake. What the city can do, though, is begin to set goals for pedestrian access in winter weather, and move towards attaining those goals over time. The City Council is an essential part of developing the vision behind these goals, and seeing them through over time. The following thoughts describe goals that would improve pedestrian mobility during snow.

Pedestrian snow arteries. The city might set as a goal the establishment of a network of pedestrian snow arteries, targeted for priority snow removal, that would permit pedestrians to travel to major destinations and to within a few blocks of their homes in safety. These arteries would have sidewalks wide enough to be plowed using sidewalk plows, and would receive attention on par with roadways both during and after storms. The process of establishing snow arteries could be gradual, but the decision must be made to begin the planning process.

Snow storage areas. Another snow removal goal could be the designation of snow storage areas in major squares or at other important locations. Currently, snow from roadways is most often plowed onto sidewalks, rendering the already-narrow sidewalks even more impassible, and blocking storm drains and fire hydrants. A better solution in some areas would be to designate some parking places for snow storage so that plows could collect the snow without blocking either roadways or sidewalks. These storage areas could be located so as not to interfere with drainage or fire facilities.

City-supplied snow supplies. Citizens will always be an important part of the city's efforts to keep its sidewalks clear. Still another step the city could take could be to improve the efficiency of their work sidewalks by providing sand and salt for those who ask. Sand is already available at some locations in the city, but most people without cars can only retrieve small amounts of it. A twenty-five pound bag of salt from a hardware store is an impossible burden for many older pedestrians to handle. Many of these people would happily and promptly treat their icy sidewalks if they could arrange for the city to drop off a bag of sand or salt sometime during the fall.

I look forward to hearing the Council's comments on these ideas, and to working with you to make Cambridge a year-round pedestrian friendly city.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Michael Halle", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Michael Halle

Consent Communication #6

8-83

Communication was received from
Michael Halle, transmitting concern
regarding snow removal on sidewalks.

In City Council February 9, 1998

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