

# Snow sense at council still slip slidin' away

BY NAOMI LAKRITZ, CALGARY HERALD    SEPTEMBER 30, 2009

How much is it worth to you not to be involved in a car accident due to poorly plowed roads? How much is it worth to you to arrive on time at work the day after a snowfall, uninjured, with your car intact and your insurance rates remaining stable? Is it worth \$22.50 a year?

That's what Eric Sawyer, the city's chief financial officer, told me yesterday a two per cent property tax increase would approximately amount to for the average householder.

The two-per-cent increase has been bruited about as likely if the city were to improve its snow clearing practices with another estimated \$14 million added to the budget. I'm incredulous that people would balk at paying so little extra for so much more peace of mind.

Just think of the costs involved in those hundreds of accidents that are inevitably reported after a snowfall. Soft-tissue injuries can do lasting damage and the \$4,500 cap on compensation, which doesn't even begin to cover the costs of the pain, the physiotherapy, the lost time, productivity and enjoyment of life, is still in place. Your car gets smashed up and, due to the backlog of other smashed-up cars created by that same snowfall, you may go quite a while before it can get fixed. If you're at fault for the accident, your insurance rates go up. Worst-case scenario: Someone is killed in an accident on a snowy, icy road that would never be left in such a condition in other cities with progressive snow-clearing policies. How is it possible that paying an extra \$22.50 a year can still resonate as an outrageous sum in the face of all those costs, not to mention the stress of being injured, or worse, the grief of losing a loved one?

On Monday, council approved a report that supports the status quo on snow clearing. That means the coming winter holds pleasant prospects indeed -- such as cars carving out their own lanes on major arteries that should have been cleared the night before the morning commute, while city officials protest indignantly that of course plows have been working through the wee hours and didn't they do a great job? Plows are everywhere, the officials claim. Plows are nowhere, the angry citizens reply. And so it will go for yet another winter. You don't have to be psychic to read the same old mouldy tea leaves all over again.

Chinooks are free, but as we learned last winter when the big snowstorm hit on Dec. 12 and no chinook arrived until around the first of March, they are not exactly the most reliable method of clearing snow. Nor should a city of more than a million people be relying on the whimsies of the weather to solve its snow problems. It's not like we're living in *Crocus*, the little town in Theatre Calgary's thoroughly delightful play, *Jake and the Kid*, in which Jake promises to build a machine that will make it rain to end the drought and save everyone's crops -- and he delivers. We have no Jake who can save us with a chinook-making machine.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart claims the issue will be further debated this fall. I admire her fighting spirit, but I'm skeptical. This is Calgary, after all, the city that calls itself world-class, but has an embarrassing record of bringing up the rear and dragging its feet excruciatingly on so many key issues -- public smoking bans, municipally run blue-box programs, and pesticide bans, to name a few.

I'm willing to see a two per cent property tax increase if it means a basic service -- snow clearing -- will be improved. You can't clamour for services to improve if you're also simultaneously clamouring that taxes must not go up. Given that 2010 is an election year, I suspect council is even warier of asking Calgarians to hand over more money, always an unpopular move. Yet, \$22.50 a year works out to \$1.87 a month. That's cheaper than a plain old snow shovel; they retail for about \$26.50 for a decent one in stores around town. And that's way cheaper than what you'll pay if your insurance rates rise because you were in an accident, or for that matter, what physiotherapy will cost you when you've maxed out your expenses beyond the \$4,500 cap on soft-tissue injuries.

Unfortunately, it looks like it'll be winter as usual this year. Hundreds of accidents, badly plowed roads, some very scary, white-knuckle moments of slipslidin' away while behind the wheel -- and much rhetoric from city officials trying to fend off irate citizens by insisting that everything's coming up roses. Roses don't grow in winter. So for 50 cents more than the \$22.50 that proper snow clearing would cost, I'm going to buy a book of tickets and ride Calgary Transit on those days.

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