

Snowplow tracking apps hold cities accountable for cleanup

January 19 2015, by Jason Keyser

As another storm flung snow at Chicago, Alexandra Clark wondered how she'd get to work. Like an increasing number of snowbound city dwellers, she had a ready tool at hand: an app that tracks hundreds of city snowplows in close to real time.

But something seemed out of whack.

"Plow tracker said my street was plowed an hour ago - Pull the other leg," the 31-year-old video producer tweeted to the mayor's office, including a photo of her snowed-in street.

Across the country, local leaders have made plow-tracking data public in free mobile apps, turning citizens into snow watchdogs and giving them a place to look for answers instead of clogging phone lines at city call centers to fume. Chicago and New York introduced apps in early 2012, and Seattle has gotten into the game, as have some places in Maryland and Virginia.

Boston briefly experimented, too, though their site was so popular it crashed during a February 2013 storm, hampering the response effort. The city hasn't made another attempt.

The apps tap into GPS data already collected by the city to direct plows, so no extra money is spent in the creation. It's a politically deft move by cities where bungled storm responses have cost officials their jobs, and a way to show skeptics that plow drivers are working hard—and not just

clearing the streets of the wealthy and well-connected.

But in New York and Chicago, in particular, the tech savvy have scrutinized the sites. Armed with the ultimate proof—the cities' own data—they've needled public officials about snow-cleanup shortfalls on social media.

"It puts a lot of pressure on everybody involved to be more responsible and to be more accountable," said Priscilla Dixon, a Chicago lawyer who has used the app and is a believer in engaging the city via social media.

Clark remembers peering out the window of her Wicker Park apartment on the city's West Side in a January 2014 storm. A pair of heavy truck tire tracks suggested a GPS-equipped plow might indeed have passed, but with the blade up.

"No joke, the next week when it snowed overnight, a plow had come through and taken off the side mirror of my car," the Redondo Beach, California-native recalled with a laugh. "It's probably coincidence but after that I really didn't tweet much to the City of Chicago anymore."

Mayors in Chicago and other cities where snow is frozen into local lore know that storms can doom political careers. A botched response to a 1979 blizzard in Chicago is said to have cost then-Mayor Michael Bilandic re-election.

More recently, a 2011 blizzard entombed cars and buses and stranded hundreds of people for 12 hours overnight on Chicago's Lake Shore Drive, and a December 2010 blizzard did much the same in New York City. Those debacles prompted both cities to create plow trackers. Then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg talked of wanting to fix the disconnect between what NYC officials were saying and what people were seeing.

In the lead-up to one of the first storms this year, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel exuded confidence.

"We're going to bring all of the assets and strengths of the city to bear to make sure that people are safe, secure and that our streets are safe, plowed and passible," he told reporters on Jan. 5.

The app drew more than 2,500 visitors in the hours that followed, Department of Streets and Sanitation spokeswoman Molly Poppe said.

The city is not bothered by the extra scrutiny, says Poppe, who engages residents via the department's Twitter account. A typical exchange involves her explaining that blowing snow can make a freshly plowed street look like it's been skipped.

Last February, residents in the Albany Park neighborhood on Chicago's Northwest Side contended their block had not been cleared all season, forcing them to attack the street themselves with shovels and snowblowers.

The app seemed to back them up, but Poppe pointed out that narrow streets require smaller plows, which last year were not feeding tracking data. In any case, the story appeared on a local TV newscast, and the next day, the snow was gone.

Web developer Derek Eder has crunched three years' worth of plow data with his own app, ClearStreets, and is convinced Chicago generally deploys plows fairly throughout the city. But that hasn't dispelled all suspicion to the contrary.

"If you're an alderman or mayor, you're going to get your streets plowed first," said insurance lawyer Tom Manning, who lives in Bloomington, Illinois, but has checked the app before two-hour drives to Chicago.

"That's just the way it's been for many, many years."

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