



**WHATCOM COUNTY  
PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT**

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**MAINTENANCE & OPERATIONS**

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## **Winter Snow and Ice Policy**

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 of the 960 miles of county-maintained roads.

Road plowing and sanding is prioritized based on factors like how much traffic a road receives, if it is a transit or school route, if the road has emergency facilities like police and fire stations, and other similar criteria. This means that service on low-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 very 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 [Twitter](#) for updates.
- Information on road closures can be found at <http://www.whatcomcounty.us/952/Road-Closures-Restrictions---Weather-Rel>.
- For community-wide emergencies, additional information can be found at the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office (WCSO) Division of Emergency Management (EDM). Users can sign up under Notify Me on the Whatcom County website for notifications from DEM.

### **A Note about COVID-19**

The coronavirus pandemic has affected the department's winter operations by limiting our ability to hire and train new employees and for new employees to obtain the CDL licenses and training needed to drive snow and ice equipment. In addition, social distancing restricts how crews work together. Levels of service could be further restricted if employees must quarantine or isolate due to infection.



## **How Priority Levels are Determined**

A Priority Level (PL) classification is assigned to each public road in the county. The road classification is determined by a combination of:

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

The PL is reviewed annually as the road's criteria could change, which could raise or lower the level of service to the road.

- The intent of the PL classification is to provide a level of service Whatcom County residents can expect throughout the winter based on the type of road.
- A map of county roads and their priority levels can be found on our snow and winter weather webpage, <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 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 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.
- Accumulations of snow can be expected to exceed twelve inches.
- 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 twelve inches of 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.
- Accumulations of snow can be expected to exceed twelve inches.
- 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 twelve inches of snow, compact snow, and ice.

### **Situational Policy and Procedure Changes and Modifications**

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.

### **Sanding Operations**

Sand will be selectively applied to road surfaces during freezing rain and black ice events in the priority level order listed above. Public Works often applies sand at hills or intersections when crew and equipment are available and it is safe to do so.



### **Private Roads**

Whatcom County does not provide winter weather services to private roads. Contractors that provide snow plowing and other winter services for private roads are listed on contractor 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 his or her contractor.

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

#### **For your vehicle:**

- Ensure your vehicle is up to date on all routine maintenance to reduce the chance of it 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 you must do so 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 to last up to one week. [Read the winter storm preparedness guide from weather.gov](#).
- Check weather reports frequently since forecasts can change.
- Plan ahead for even longer 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 just 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).