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The Voice of Your Community

Midwinter Market Brings Delicious Treats and Valentine Delights on February 11



Produce, specialty food, flowers and sweets will be available at the midwinter Ashland Farmers Market.

The Ashland Farmers Market (AFM) is holding its first-ever Midwinter Market, just in time for Valentine's Day, at the Ashland Middle School on Saturday, Feb. 11 from 9 am to 1 pm. It may be deep winter, but nearly 20 food vendors will bring vibrant color, summer tastes and wonderful sweet things. There will be root veg-

etables and other winter specialties. Several farms will be selling the promise of summer's bounty in the form of CSA (community supported agriculture, or farm) shares. There will also be cheeses, locally grown dry beans, Middle Eastern specialties, humanely raised meats and zucchini-based breads. The market will feature fresh cut flowers Valentine's Day delivery. Nineteen artisans—some favorites from the summer market (held June to October at 125 Front St. across from the library) and some new ones—will showcase their crafts.

For more information, visit www.ashlandfarmers-market.org.

A Day (and Night) in the Life of An Ashland Snow Plow Driver

By JULIE NARDONE,
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

If you think it's easy to snow plow Ashland's 85 miles of roads, please think again.

Plowing through the snow requires intense concentration, awareness, and multi-tasking.

For starters, Ashland's municipal plows are massive. These towering six- and eight-wheel giants stand 11 feet tall, carry gross loads up to 43,000 pounds and run at 310 horsepower. Hoisting yourself up and into the cab takes the body strength of Sampson. The trucks also have a lot of moving parts: a plow, belly scraper, salt/sand box and a spindle, all controlled by the joystick and other dials in the cab.

Almost simultaneously, the plow operator has to look straight ahead for oncoming vehicles and people, check the side view mir-



Multiple controls inside the large cab. (Photo/Julie Nardone)

rors for drivers who might have entered the truck's large blind spot, check the rearview mirror to see if the salt or sand is still spraying, be cognizant of where the curb and other hazards lie and operate the various controls.

To complicate the situation, the operator has to crank the heat on full blast and open the windows.

SNOW PLOW DRIVER
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SNOW PLOW DRIVER

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"If I don't keep the heat on high, the windshield will freeze," Robert (Benny) Bonavire, General Foreman Highway/CPT, said. "The windshield gets so hot the wipers begin to melt."

I observed freezing windshields during my recent snowstorm plowing tour with Doug Small, Department of Public Works (DPW) Director. Fifteen minutes into our winter wonderland roundabout, giant balls of ice formed on the windshield wipers. Small had to get out and slam the wipers on the windshield several times to dislodge the ice. The slightest hesitation in the wipers resulted in a blurry smear of visibility.

Soon after our own icing problem, Small followed a pair of snowplow drivers up Oak Street, who had pulled over to de-ice their windshield wipers. Municipi-

pal drivers plow their assigned roads in teams. The first plow goes down the center of the road. The second plow stays to the right, dispenses salt and/or sand and catches the left over drift. In really bad storms, the enormous rear-wheel drive trucks can slip off the side of the road and get stuck. In that situation, they call general foreman Bonavire to pull them out with his truck.

The heaviest storms wreak havoc on the trucks' windshield wipers and hydraulic systems. If the driver notices either of them start to fail, he returns to the DPW garage for a repair. In a high adrenaline scene reminiscent of an Indy 500 pit stop, drivers pull their trucks in, jump out and lone mechanic Dan Maurer, works feverishly to get the vehicle back in service.

Snow Removal Strategy

When Small first joined Ashland's DPW department as director in 2004, he was told, "Every storm is different." He has found that advice to be true. "If the storm starts in the morning, the strategy would be to salt first because salt melts the snow and reduces the road's freezing point. Once the roads get covered with ice, it's difficult to remove. If it starts at night we might use a salt/sand brine and belly scrape." Surprisingly, I learned that plowing usually comes last.

Plowing Dangers

When the snow comes down fast and furious, it can be hard for drivers to know their whereabouts because identifying markers get



James Bomba and Robert Bonavire in front of the town's newest snowplow truck. (Photo/Julie Nardone)

cloaked in white. As Small continued to plow the roads, I, too, got lost in the mesmerizing beauty of twirling and twinkling snowflakes and easily lost my sense of direction. I had to keep asking, "Where are we?" In addition, the snow can blanket hazardous objects like curbs, mailboxes and raised manhole covers, which if hit result in plow damage or driver injury. A raised manhole cover can throw a truck sideways and the driver into the windshield or dashboard. Moreover, automobile drivers may make a sudden stop or pull in front of a plow, not understanding that plows are the equivalent of mini freight trains – the large weight makes it hard to stop.

Another potentially dangerous situation occurs during ascents up Ashland's steepest roads, of which there are quite a few. Small chugged up the almost vertical and dead-ended Bellview Heights. Surprisingly, the top provided no

place to turn around. Fortunately, a former municipal employee allows staff to use his driveway. In icy storms, the hill gets so slippery that large plow trucks have to back up the road, sanding in reverse order to provide surface grit for the wheels.

End-of-Driveway Blues

Ashland's 16 municipal and up to 30 contract snowplow drivers work as hard as they can to clear the roads. If it's a heavy storm, you may see them go up and down your road many times. Every other time it will be on your side of the road, which means an unwanted dump of snow into the driveway you just spent two hours clearing. "We aren't intentionally trying to give residents more work. If we try to swerve around the driveways, we can't keep the roads safe," Small said.

Other drivers concurred. "I've had residents throw shovels at me, run after me or even stand in the

middle of the road attempting to block me when I do a return sweep," Bonavire said. Jason Cadima, Foreman Water/Sewer Department, added, "It's difficult when residents park cars at the end of the driveway to block the snow generated by the plow. It makes it impossible to clear the roads curb to curb."

Embarrassingly, I have been one of those annoyed residents. Now that I understand the driver's side of the story, I'm going to view the replenishing snow pile at the end of my driveway in a more loving light.

Ashland's Reputation

Ashland's DPW has a sterling snow plowing reputation in the area. "I often get calls from people complaining about the black ice or rutted roads in the towns around us," Bonavire said. "We take great pride in our work, an ethic instilled in us years ago by former DPW Director Ben Montenegro and mechanic Scott Thouren."

DPW Requests

To ensure Ashland's roads and residents stay safe during and right after a storm, the DPW had several simple requests. Please do not park cars on the road, put trash bags directly on the curb, pull out in front of the plows or let children play in the streets. While families are cuddled up in front of the fire watching HBO, Ashland's snow removal teams are out in the cold often driving for hours on end. Adhering to their requests seems like a small way Ashland residents can contribute to the safety of our own winter roads.

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