



Snow days: Harsh winter highlights need for facility preparation and planning

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Winter 2013-2014 will long be remembered as one of the coldest and snow plagued winters that New York has seen in a number of years, sparking an unprecedented, nation-wide rock salt shortage as a result of long, brutal stretches of subzero temperatures. The shortage saw prices skyrocket from the normal \$65-\$95 per ton, to as much as \$250 per ton by the end of February 2014. While both governor Cuomo and New York City mayor Bill de Blasio remained confident through the season that New York retained adequate, though depleted, storage of rock salt, this was not the case for much of the private sector.

This past winter provided a tremendous host of new challenges for facilities managers, landlords and contractors, who are responsible for snow and ice removal for private and commercial buildings and facilities. Caught off guard by the cumulative effect of so many consecutive snow storms, facilities managers, owners and landlords must now struggle with the budgetary impacts of this winter. While the experience of last winter exposed poor planning on the part of many facilities managers and contractors, it also provides a number of lessons for better preparation and management in future.

As winter 2013-2014 comes to a close, what is abundantly clear is that facilities' managers, owners and landlords can no longer afford to plan for or hope for mild winter weather. This year's rock salt shortage clearly demonstrated the danger that lies should facilities managers not have a comprehensive and complete preparation plan that takes into account numerous contingencies.

The first and most obvious contingency is the need to secure additional sources of rock salt. It is no longer adequate or professionally responsible for facilities' managers, landlords and owners to have only one or two rock salt suppliers. Last winter's experience demonstrates that it is local governments and municipalities who will have "first claim" to much needed rock salt supplies. Therefore, diligent managers now need to secure multiple sources for rock salt as well as back-up suppliers. Failure to do so will force facilities managers to spend more money in an emergency.

Rock salt, however, is not the only resource that facilities managers, landlords and owners need to include in their preparation and contingency planning. Heavy snow fall presents a new list of challenges that must be included in any contingency plan. For example, facilities' managers must include plans to hire heavier equipment to remove larger than normal volumes of snow, as well as plan for the additional fuel and maintenance costs involved.

This winter also saw a dramatic increase in the number of commercial properties looking for contractors to clear snow from roofs to avoid collapse. Such work is time-consuming, dangerous and expensive, with a crew of four costing approximately \$200 or more per hour. While many facilities' managers, owners and landlords may consider this possibility to be remote, it is necessary to include contractors who can provide this service when needed. Plans for snow removal from roofs

should be part of comprehensive and responsible contingency strategy.

Facilities' managers, owners and landlords also need to make sure that they have additional personnel lined-up to avoid manpower shortages in the face of major or continuing snow events. They need to make sure that they are planning and scheduling workers appropriately to avoid exhaustion among workers, particularly those operating heavy equipment. Additionally, facilities' managers, owners and landlords must recognize that clearing efforts will take longer in subzero temperatures and plan accordingly. Extreme cold weather is dangerous for workers, who may only be able to remain outside for 45 minutes at a time before breaking to warm-up. When making plans for severe weather, managers must make sure they have enough workers lined up to cope with emergency events and clear properties promptly.

In addition to preparation and contingency planning, facilities' managers and owners must invest in creating robust and report rich communications systems that can handle the strain of repeated storms. They must also implement standard and proactive plans to communicate with landlords and tenants in the lead up, during and immediately following snow events. In many instances, last winter saw a breakdown in communication on the part of facilities managers who failed to keep landlords and tenants up to date during snow storms. Such failures demonstrate the need for standard procedures in any communications plan to ensure that everyone is receiving the same, consistent and timely communications.

A successful system will clearly articulate the duties of each person and which requires that snow clearance reports be made available for easy access. Facilities' managers, landlords and owners should include requirements in their plans for reporting property damage, such as pot holes, to clients after clearing. Such reports will help landlords keep up with general maintenance and reduce potential liability for vehicle accidents or damage as well as slip and falls incidents. A comprehensive communications system will reduce problems, increase confidence and build good will with clients and tenants, who will in turn be more understanding in the face of unexpected weather events or other emergencies.

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