



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

Department of Transportation and Public Facilities

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER
Ryan Anderson, P.E., Commissioner

PO Box 112500
Juneau, Alaska 99811-2500
Main: 907.465.3900
dot.alaska.gov

October 1, 2024

Honorable Finance Co-Chairs
Alaska State Legislature
State Capitol Building
Juneau, AK 99801

Subject: Winter Operations Improvements for the 2024/2025 Season

Dear Finance Committee Co-Chairs,

I am writing to provide an update on the Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities' (DOT&PF) preparations for the upcoming 2024/2025 winter season with respect to snow clearing on roads and sidewalks, which has been a topic of significant interest and attention. This letter serves to fulfill both the October 1, 2024, and December 20, 2024 reporting request responsive to the legislative intent language in the FY 2025 operating budget.

Alaska DOT&PF has undertaken several initiatives and improvements to enhance our snow removal operations and ensure the safety and mobility of Alaskans throughout the winter months. These efforts reflect our commitment to maintaining a resilient and adaptable transportation system in the face of Alaska's challenging, even unprecedented, winter conditions.

Our key snow removal improvements fall under the following three categories in this update:

- Workforce and Resourcing
- Equipment
- Policies and Communications

Workforce and Resourcing Improvements

Increased LTC Contract Funding and Vacancy Rates: Thanks to Governor Dunleavy and the Legislature's approval of monetary terms in the latest collective bargaining agreement (CBA) for labor, trades and crafts (LTC), of which many Maintenance and Operations (M&O) forces at DOT&PF are a member, this new CBA included significant increases in LTC. Starting on July 1, 2024, these individuals—who play a crucial role in ensuring the safety and reliability of our transportation infrastructure—will see a five percent increase in their wages across the board for cost of living along with step increases for a total increase of 14.75 percent in the first year of the new agreement along with additional increases based on the consumer price index (CPI) for Anchorage, Alaska. These step increases offer an accelerated pathway for career growth and enhanced earnings potential, particularly for those in the lower wage grades where competitive wages were most challenged, who could receive

"Keep Alaska Moving."

additional step boosts under the agreement. Recognizing the rising cost of living in certain areas of the state, there was also an adjustment to subsistence rates, increasing the allowances for workers stationed in central duty locations, helping to offset daily living expenses. Overall, this new agreement provides not only a financial increase but also a clearer, more structured progression for those whose work is essential to maintaining the lifelines of our state.

Relative to more recent contracts, these increases are the highest in recent memory and will assist the department in improving recruitment and retention of winter operations personnel, including operators and mechanics, who are essential to keeping Alaska’s roads safe during winter. Below is a snapshot of vacancies rates from the time the Department is compiling this letter to this same time last year. Note the overall improvements:

M&O Vacancy Rates	October 2023	October 2024
Southcoast Region M&O (SR)	19%	13% (-6%)
Central Region M&O (CR)	13%	11% (-2%)
Northern Region M&O (NR)	25%	27% (+2%)
State Equipment Fleet (SEF)	24%	20% (-4%)
Fairbanks International (FAI)	28%	14% (-14%)
Anchorage International (ANC)	11%	11% (No Change)

In areas such as Fairbanks M&O, where vacancies have remained higher than other areas, strategies include:

- A “2-week-on, 2-week-off” (2x2) work schedule gives 22 hours of coverage per day, seven days a week, as both an incentive to work those shifts for the pay and operational efficiencies for that same crew spending more time onsite. This schedule also helps with recruitment as it is approximately a 25 percent pay increase due to built-in overtime (OT) within the schedule. It also allows the department to call in staff who are off shift and work them for a few days, while they still get a decent time off, thereby reducing crew fatigue.
- Some internal position management downgrading to allow for more opportunities for apprentices and training.
- Implementing flex positions allowing operators to come in with less experience, and as they grow, they can flex up to higher pay without having to move positions.
- Implementing Non-Permanent operator positions statewide, which allows the department to keep interested equipment operators on a list to be called in when needed. This allows for off-season operators or retired DOT&PF staff to take short callouts for assistance to help when needed.

Snow Removal Contracts: While the intent language provided in the FY25 operating budget calls for a plan that “should not include increased reliance on contractors,” the Governor advanced, and the legislature approved, \$915.5 in UGF for a new, statewide allocation to contract for snow removal and to improve service. This strategy was advanced and adopted because it gives flexibility, through contracted supplemental snow removal, where the department can focus those resources. No one can guess where the next extraordinary weather event will occur and, therefore, flexibility in resourcing for response is vital to providing the best service where it is needed most. To that end, Alaska DOT&PF has expanded through this FY25 operating budget allocation for contracted snow removal in several regional hubs, concentrating on population centers, including Fairbanks, Anchorage, the Mat-Su Valley, and Kenai. These contracts supplement our State maintenance forces, while remaining flexible to allow for the

reallocation of resources across the state during extreme winter events that demand above-anticipated assistance.

Enhanced Focus on Sidewalk Snow Removal: The department is increasing collaboration with local governments and contractors to address sidewalk snow removal more effectively. Regional contracts include sidewalk clearing, and M&O forces are coordinating closely with local public works to provide seamless service across all modes of public access. As an example, Central Region DOT&PF has scheduled recurring meetings with the Municipality of Anchorage (MOA) to continue their collaborative effort and ensure state / local forces can be agile with the department's plan to address challenges and unforeseen events as they arise. These efforts aim to improve pedestrian safety and mobility, particularly in urban areas where sidewalks are critical for winter transportation.

Equipment Improvements

State Equipment Fleet (SEF) Mechanics: Specialized skillsets such as heavy equipment mechanics have been more of a challenge in recent years given a highly competitive labor market. Equipment used for snow and ice removal requires constant maintenance and repairs both pre-season and during the winter season. This time last year, SEF saw higher vacancy rates, over 30 percent versus under 10 percent a few years before, among heavy duty mechanics. In Anchorage, more mechanics available ensures M&O forces have more equipment available to respond to snow events. At this time last year, the Anchorage Heavy Equipment shop had 60 percent of mechanic positions vacant; this year it is down to 33 percent.

Seasonal Equipment Changeovers: State M&O equipment is modified at the shoulder of each major season - summer operations and winter operations – to optimize use of maintenance assets. The phasing of these equipment changeovers is timed to ensure summer season work tapers off where needed while winter season capacity is available when first ice and snow is present. SEF and M&O forces have worked closely together, with improvements in workforce vacancies versus this time last year, on the changeover of equipment. Unavailable equipment, either because fewer mechanics were available, or the start of winter operations began sooner than equipment was ready to address, was a contributing factor to previous significant event responses. Additional mechanic staff and better coordination of equipment changeover will improve equipment readiness going into the winter season.

Equipment Location and Task Optimization: M&O and SEF crews are constantly evaluating equipment needs based on winter operations experience. Where there are assets identified that are underutilized at specific stations, that equipment is transferred to other regional stations to ensure optimal use of those assets to compliment the overall resourcing at that location. SEF has also worked diligently on specific equipment such as sidewalk blowers (supporting additional inventory on key components such as carrier unit and blower heads) to ensure such equipment can be operational and the clearing of pedestrian facilities can receive more attention with faster response to clear activities.

Additionally, SEF has worked on acquiring additional equipment, such as the highway snowblower recently added to the Anchorage fleet (via surplus from Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport), and SEF is working to fortify the fleet with additional backup plow trucks and graders from surplus or overhauls. As a specific example, Central Region DOT&PF is leasing two additional sidewalk blower units this winter season and they have ordered two additional blower units that will mount on Ag tractors (easier to source than other alternative equipment). The blower units will allow Central Region to use what has been seasonal equipment year-round to clear hillside pathways. While these new

blowers are not scheduled for delivery until March 2025, this information is intended to demonstrate the department's commitment to enhancing sidewalk snow clearing efforts and should be available to M&O forces for what is historically the snowiest months of the winter season.

Policies and Communications

Updated 511 Policy: We have revised the department's 511 policy to ensure that timely and accurate information regarding winter road conditions and traffic impacts is available for all roadways. This update will provide the public with enhanced access to real-time road condition information, allowing for better trip planning and decision-making.

Guidance for Supplemental Contract Service: The department is working through the development of a new policy and procedure (P&P) designed to assist our M&O teams in determining when to trigger supplemental services for lower-priority roads (Priority 3 and Priority 4). This will help ensure equitable snow removal and maintenance across all regions, particularly for communities that have reported the department's focus on higher priority roads have led to hardships on lower priority roads they utilized to access larger arterials and highways. At the moment, contract language uses M&O discretion based on information reported by crews and other stakeholders to trigger supplemental service. While this allows crews flexibility and discretion, a policy to ensure a maximum time for service can be established and is planned for future contracts.

Winter Operations Dashboard: In January 2025, the department is targeting the launch of a new Winter Operations Dashboard, available to the public. This near-real-time platform will display road maintenance and snow clearing activities, offering Alaskans critical insights to better inform their travel routes during winter conditions. This dashboard fulfills a commitment to the public and legislators as a result of reviewing legislative intent directing a review of winter road priorities and our 2023 Snow Summit discussions.

M&O Manual Updates: Updates to the M&O Manual, last updated in 2014, with new details to reflect best practices in winter maintenance, are planned by the end of the year. The specific update, targeted for late 2024 or early 2025, is an update on use and policies surrounding brine for snow and ice management. A literature review currently underway will inform this manual update.

Mobile Road Weather Information Systems (MRWIS) installed on DOT&PF Vehicles: This cutting-edge technology will provide real-time road condition reporting, enhancing safety and decision-making for both department staff and the traveling public. With predictive analysis capabilities, MRWIS will further improve winter maintenance strategies and resource allocation across Alaska's highways.

Virtual Snow Summit Update: In October/November 2024, DOT&PF plans to provide an update through a series of presentations online as a follow-up to our successful Snow Summit in October 2023. This virtual update will draw from much of the material in this letter with department staff to provide a more detailed readout of the process and path to continued improvements. Useful input was solicited in the 2023 Snow Summit, which informed some of the above efforts and the department believes in the continued commitment of sharing with stakeholders the progress that has been made together. Another in-person Snow Summit is planned for 2025 to bring stakeholders into the same location for information and input sessions (working toward an every-other-year in-person vs. virtual Summit).

These improvements reflect Alaska DOT&PF's commitment to both public safety and operational efficiency. The department is confident that these initiatives will enhance the ability to respond to winter weather challenges and maintain the critical transportation infrastructure that Alaskans depend on.

Thank you for your ongoing support of the Alaska DOT&PF. I look forward to continued collaboration as we work together to serve the people of Alaska. Should you have any questions or require further details, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ryan Anderson".

Ryan Anderson, P.E.
Commissioner
Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities

cc:

Laura Stidolph, Legislative Director, Office of the Governor
Lacey Sanders, OMB Director, Office of the Governor
Alexei Painter, Director, Alaska Legislative Finance Division
James Kaufman, Senator, Chair of Senate Transportation
Kevin McCabe, Representative, Chair of House Transportation