

Our view: Street sweeping

State DOT has botched the job this year in Anchorage

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The state department of transportation has made a total hash of this year's contract for sweeping a winter's worth of sand and gravel off state roads and sidewalks in Anchorage. The Fourth of July is rapidly approaching, and everywhere you turn, you can see a state-maintained road that is still waiting for the sweeper to arrive. As of Friday, only about one-sixth of the sweeping work was complete on state roads. (The Municipality of Anchorage handles smaller roads and streets and finished its sweeping work long ago.)

The state tried to do the job on the cheap, with an inexperienced contractor who doesn't have enough equipment to move faster. The state made the situation worse by issuing a contract with no performance benchmarks. The timeline says the contractor doesn't have to finish until July 22 -- far too long to do a job that should be part of spring cleanup.

This isn't just an aesthetic issue. Loose sand and gravel is a hazard to bicyclists on trails and streets. Road traffic stirs the winter leftovers into the air, making breathing more difficult for people with sensitive lungs. Heavy rains can wash the sediment into storm sewers, many of which empty into local streams. That's bad for stream life, since the sediment is tainted with oil, grease and heavy metals left behind by months of traffic.

The state's abysmal road-and-sidewalk sweeping has provoked many complaints to legislators and many letters to the editor. Friday, several legislators and other citizens showed they'd had enough with bureaucratic mismanagement and excuses. They grabbed brooms and shovels and took it upon themselves to sweep part of a pathway along Benson Boulevard in Spenard. (See photo.) It was an embarrassing commentary on how the state has botched this simple job.

"They want this 2-mile long bridge (Knik Arm Crossing), and we can't take care of the streets we have," said West Anchorage Assemblywoman Harriet Drummond as she wielded a broom.

Another helper joked, "Next week, there will be a bake sale" to get DOT more money for the work.

But DOT can't blame the problem on a shortage of money, says Spenard state Rep. Mike Doogan. He says he never heard DOT ask for more money to do sweeping in Anchorage -- and he sits on the subcommittee handling the agency's budget.

State street sweeping hasn't always been this bad. In some years past, the state paid the city to do the job on state roads. That way, the city crews didn't have to hopscotch across Anchorage, skipping over roads that were the state's responsibility.

More recently, though, the state decided it could save money by using a low-bid contractor instead of the city. What the state got was a low-bid contractor delivering unacceptably slow work.

"There's just no excuse for this," said Rep. Doogan. When he talks to DOT, he said, "Basically all you get is 'We're doing the best we can.' "

"At some point," Rep. Doogan says, " 'the best we can' is not good enough."

BOTTOM LINE: Taking half the summer to sweep state roads and sidewalks is not acceptable.

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