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Sharing the Snow Woes

Last Month, McHenry County held an intergovernmental meeting to discuss the woes that were faced by various local governments impacted by the constant winter storms between November and now. The meeting revealed that many agencies in Lake and McHenry County face the same objective of clear streets while trying to maintain costs of salt and personnel.

The meeting was called by the McHenry County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) Maintenance Supervisor Mark DeVries where he stated "we are brought here today because of the unexpected price of salt and the valuable commodity it has become."

Mark DeVries noted that the County still has the bare pavement policy and the level of service isn't going to change. MCDOT has purchased enough salt for the entire year and plans to use the salt when needed, but has taken steps to limit the amount of salt applied to the road by calibrating their trucks and using treated salt which allows for better melting.

The MCDOT provided examples on what is being done on their part to battle the elements and the high price of salt. During normal snow events, the MCDOT has 22 trucks on 19 routes. During a winter event, it has a 24 hour schedule with 28 staff and 12 trucks on 12 routes. During rush hours, the coverage is at its best.

When salting, the MCDOT partakes in better management practices included better training of employees, calibrating 100% of the trucks so that they are putting the right amount of salt on the road, and providing computers in all trucks to better allocate materials. Supervisors were asked to hold after storm meetings to discuss what went right or wrong. They were also out on the road observing the snow removal process. Besides salt, the County also has other techniques to clear the roads including its own liquid supplement called "Supermix". This supplement contains 85% salt brine, 10% sugar beet (geomelt) and 5% calcium chloride. Sand is also used at times. The MCDOT still plans to use treated salt and use plowing at all time which is the best way to remove snow. Also, they use Joma blades for the plows, which usually last three years.

When dealing with the price of salt, the Illinois Attorney General's Office, was asked to investigate if there was bid rigging by the Salt companies. A huge misunderstanding of how the state contracts work was revealed. Salt companies traditionally bid on areas depending on where they get salt from. Central Management Services (CMS) anticipated cost increase and increased demand; therefore they raised their price. The Attorney General's office is demanding to see facts and reasons for shortages, which CMS says increased fuel costs, late thaw for shipping and flooding along the Mississippi River. The first bids received by CMS had left some Counties out, including McHenry and Lake. The increase in demand and the bid process for salt contributed to the high prices that were perceived as bid rigging. One possible avenue for the local government entities would be to explore the possibility of a joint purchasing program. The problem is this still won't guarantee lower prices.

Mark DeVries concluded by saying "in the future we can't control the salt prices but can work together to ensure we give the best possible service to the communities."

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"Providing administrative support and implementation of policies and directives as determined by the County Board"