



A Call to Action to Make Roszie the Most Walkable Neighborhood in Boston

March 16, 2021

BY ELECTRONIC MAIL ONLY (ed.flynn@boston.gov)

Boston City Council
Committee on City and Neighborhood Services
One City Hall Plaza
Boston, MA 02201
Attention: Ed Flynn, Committee Chair

RE: Docket #0182 - Supplemental Sidewalk Clearance Program

Chairman Flynn and members of the Committee:

Thank you for giving the public the opportunity to weigh in on the subject of snow clearance on our city's sidewalks. I offer my comments here on my own, as a Roslindale resident, and also on behalf of WalkUP Roslindale, a collaborative community group with hundreds of supporters founded in 2015 that takes its name from the growing movement to foster and improve "Walkable Urban Places." Our long term goal is to make Roslindale the most walkable neighborhood in Boston.

With respect to the topic of today's hearing, I'd like to offer an observation, a suggestion, and an expression of strong support:

1. An Observation: Sidewalk Snow Clearance for Pedestrians in Boston is Completely Broken

This is not news to anyone paying any attention. But our city should be deeply embarrassed at how incredibly hostile to pedestrians its current overall snow clearance program actually is. To be clear, this is not a knock on the people who work on the front lines of the current framework, doing the jobs they are given and doing them well after every snowfall. Instead, this failure is systemic. The city's snow clearance system as currently conceptualized and operated takes responsibility for and focuses entirely on clearing the motor vehicle lanes of public ways. Municipal resources and attention are devoted to those lanes and they are taken care of. For sidewalks and all other pedestrian facilities, responsibility is uniformly denied by the city and is instead placed on adjoining property owners by municipal ordinance, setting up, by design, a patchwork response dependent on everyone doing what they're supposed to do and, when that doesn't happen, neighbors dropping dimes on neighbors through 311 and, in theory, the city following up with enforcement, leading to obvious practical and racial and socioeconomic equity problems.

In other words, our city clearly and unequivocally makes sure motor vehicle drivers can get where they want to go anywhere on the street network as soon as humanly possible after a major

snowstorm and people on foot are left entirely on their own with a set of sidewalks and pedestrian facilities reliant on a multitude of individual property owners to fulfill their clearance obligation with predictable results that turn the network into a series of disconnected segments of clearance. This woeful imbalance leads to people on foot having to take their lives into their own hands, abandon sidewalks and pedestrian facilities, and walk in the immaculately cleared vehicle travel lanes. The city's is compounded by the frightfully slow and patchwork response of the city when it is itself the property owner adjacent to sidewalks and other pedestrian facilities. The sidewalks next to community centers, parks, and playgrounds – at least in my neighborhood – are routinely among the last sidewalks to be cleared, if they are cleared at all. Most of the time, the snow has to completely melt before they are passable again. The current system and the city's disregard for pedestrian snow clearance is both dangerous and inconsistent with Boston's image of itself as "America's Walking City" and as a city that adopted Vision Zero more than 6 years ago.

Finally, the current system isn't just imbalanced, it actually operates in such a way that in the action of clearing motor vehicle lanes for drivers, snow is piled up on sidewalks and at intersections and corners, increasing the difficulty of clearing crosswalks and curb ramps. I have personally observed this phenomenon in my own neighborhood. The pattern is always the same. Even just a 6-inch snowfall can result in significant snowpiles at corners and intersections. WalkUP Roslindale has spent time and effort – with its "Snow Clearance Collaborative" – seeking to organize neighbors to shovel out bus stops, crosswalks, and curb ramps in cooperation with Roslindale Village Main Street and former District 5 councilor Tim McCarthy and current District 6 councilor Ricardo Arroyo. We have had some success, but it remains on a depressingly small scale in comparison to the need. A few key bus stops, crosswalks, and curb ramps are cleared, but they are a drop in the bucket and are often plowed back in by city crews continuing to clear motor vehicle lanes at the expense of everything else after a storm has ended.

2. A Suggestion: Stop the Worst Damage of the Current System First

The time has come to at least start to dial back the hostility that the city's motor vehicle lane snow clearance system exhibits toward pedestrian snow clearance by modifying the express directions to city's own crews and private contractors to avoid piling up snow at intersections, in crosswalks, and at curb ramps. We requested and received what we understand to be a typical snow clearance contract and were disappointed, but not surprised, to see nothing in writing in that contract about how the contractor was supposed to avoid doing this. If, as we were subsequently told, there are separate instructions to city crews and private contractors to avoid this outcome, they are not being followed and there are no apparent financial consequences for contractors who don't follow them. In our view, based on our experience, taking this one step now – requiring contractors and crews to keep snow out of intersections, crosswalks, and curb ramps – would significantly reduce the degree of difficulty adjacent owners have in trying to clear them under the current system.

3. An Expression of Strong Support: Adopt a City Program to Clear Sidewalks NOW

We can't overstate how much we support the Council's consideration of an organized effort, led by the city using its own hired forces, to clear pedestrian areas during and after significant snowfalls. The city has long taken responsibility for clearing thousands of miles of vehicle travel lanes citywide. The time is now for the city to take responsibility for clearing the other parts of the street network – sidewalks, traffic islands, crosswalks, curb ramps – so that we truly have a city that works for everyone at all times of the year. We will be happy to support and work with the Council and the city to make this happen in time for next winter.

Again, we thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important subject.

Sincerely yours,



Matthew J. Lawlor

Resident @ 15 Basto Terrace, Roslindale

About WalkUP Roslindale

WalkUP Roslindale, which takes its name from the international movement to foster “Walkable Urban Places,” is a collaborative group of residents dedicated to making Roslindale the most walkable neighborhood in Boston. We advocate for a dynamic, livable streetscape and we support positive changes to our public and private built environment that strengthen walkability and other forms of active mobility as means toward better personal and public health, safety, social capital, economic development, and environmental sustainability. We are led by a steering group of about thirty residents and have nearly 1,000 additional supporters. More information about WalkUP Roslindale and our initiatives can be found at www.walkuproslindale.org. We recognize that no single group of people can be said to speak for our entire neighborhood – instead, please take the above comments as representing the collective support of our steering group members (indicated above resulting from our mission and principles).

Copy to:

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