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## 'Black roads' come at high price

*Public safety officials say pretreatment gunks up electronics*

**By Randy Billings**

SOUTH PORTLAND – During major snowstorms, the city's streets are usually some of the barest in greater Portland.

A clear line can often be seen at the municipal boundary line with Cape Elizabeth, the white compacted snow of the town in stark contrast to the black pavement in South Portland.

But the method used by the Public Works Department to keep the city's roads clear could be coming at a cost not only to vehicle owners, but to the city's public safety officials, who say a pavement pretreatment product is accelerating corrosion and ruining electronics on their vehicles.

According to Dana Anderson, director of the Parks, Recreation and Public Works Department, the city has a "black road" policy when it comes to snowstorms. That means, prior to snowstorms, the city aggressively pretreats its roadways with a product called Ice B'Gone, a high-fructose, corn-syrup solution the city mixes with its salt and sand.

"When it comes off the truck, it allows the product to grip the road better," Anderson said, noting the city is one of only two or three in the state that aggressively pretreats its roads. The pretreatment prevents the ice and snow from binding to the road, he said.

But at a City Council meeting last week, Fire Chief Kevin Guimond told the council that the product is causing serious problems to the electrical wiring underneath ambulances and fire trucks. The product gets kicked up into the frame of the vehicles and attaches itself to the sophisticated electrical systems that are now standard on emergency vehicles.

"What they're putting on the roads is wicking up our wires," Guimond said. "We're definitely seeing damage because of this."

Mayor Jim Soule said he would meet with City Manager Jim Gailey to schedule a City Council workshop to explore possible alternatives to using Ice B'Gone.



Billings photo

*A South Portland plow truck helps the city maintain its "black road" policy on Broadway at the height of Wednesday's messy storm.*

In recent years, Anderson said, the city has stopped using a magnesium chloride product, which was extremely corrosive to vehicles. The new product, he said, contains calcium chloride, which is less corrosive than the previous product.

While admitting the combination of Ice B'Gone and salt may be lethal to vehicles, Anderson said the alternative is to have icy, unsafe roads.

Anderson said the Public Works Department constantly washes the underneath of its vehicles to prevent the corrosive mixture from hardening.

Guimond, however, told the council that even though the department has purchased a new washer to scour vehicles, there are still problems.

"You will not see dirt on the outside of my firetrucks," Guimond said. "But underneath, under the framework, we just can't get it off."

Guimond said some tractor-trailer drivers are even using acid to remove the hardened road treatment.

"We can't do that to our fire trucks because we have electronics," Guimond said. "(Ice B'Gone) sticks like bubblegum on the bottom of your truck and you can't get it off."

Scarborough Public Works Director Michael Shaw and Portland Public Works Direc-

tor Michael Bobinski said they do not use the Ice B'Gone product and do not pretreat their roads. Both said they rely on rapid response to prevent the roads from icing.

The product even seems to be wrecking the environment, Guimond said, noting that in the spring the grass is usually dead within 2 feet from the roadway. But, Anderson said, if the city wants safe roads, it is going to come at a cost.

"No matter what product we throw out there, there is going to be some environmental impact," Anderson said. "Salt is as big a killer than anything else. It corrodes your car, ruins the trees and ruins the environment. But it's the only product available from a cost point of view."

In fiscal 2008, South Portland budgeted \$1.6 million for its sidewalks and streets program. Of that, more than \$200,000 was budgeted for materials that keep the city's streets clean. More than \$194,000 was set aside for salt and sand, which many municipalities use to keep roads drivable. Another \$17,000 is set aside for the Ice B'Gone product.

"It's going on your car and my car," Guimond said. "I know the public wants to drive on black roads, but this is the cost of that."

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