

Virtual Tea with Keren - Community Conversation on Snow and Ice Services with Branch Manager Craig McKeown

Link to FB Live Video: <https://fb.watch/iYNwecgGYF/>

Transcript from the Facebook Live

KT: Good evening, it's 6:01 and I want to say hello. We're having a tea or coffee conversation tonight. My name is Keren Tang, the Councillor that represents Ward Karhiio. Welcome. I'm happy to share that I'm joining you from Treaty six territory here in Edmonton. I wanted to share some information about the ward name. In case you don't know, Karhiio is a Mohawk word that means tall beautiful forest. It was part of an effort back in 2021 to revamp the ward names using Indigenous languages. And this is just a small effort for Edmonton to connect more with the land that we're on and the heritage.

Today, I'm really excited to have Craig here. He's the branch manager for Parks and Roads Services, which is where snow and ice control falls. Snow removal is a really hot topic this time of year, especially as we continue to be in this cold spell. We get a ton of emails and phone calls about snow removal, although I have to say there are a lot less compared to last year. So we noticed this is something relevant to people's everyday life. So tonight, I just want an opportunity to really dig deep into this snow and ice policy. It's a policy that has a huge impact on service delivery. We will talk about what is new this year, what has changed, what can be improved, how the snow team handles responses, things you might not know about our snow removal policy, and the city resources you can access during the winter time to support you. And as much as possible, we're gonna get to answering your questions.

For the questions, I encourage you to use the chat. Whether you're on Zoom or on Facebook, use the chat to enter your comments and questions. I have some of my team members here to help monitor, and we're going to try to answer as much as possible. A reminder to please not use threatening or abusive language - this is a platform for civil discourse and conversation. The format of these lives is a bit different from some of the in-person coffee meetings I have. The opportunity here is to develop a better understanding of city policies. This is not a 311 platform, and we won't be able to resolve any complaints on specific properties tonight. But we're happy to take that feedback away and then connect with you offline. So we do encourage you to keep your questions and comments on a broader level. And if you have specific issues, you can always contact 311 which is the most efficient way of sharing your concern, and you're welcome to follow up with our office with an email. This live has closed captioning for better accessibility. If you're having trouble with it, please let one of us know in the chat. If you want captions, you need to turn them on. And finally we're going to be recording this live and it's going to be available on the website and social media afterwards.

KT: Welcome Craig - I see you're wearing pink. I'm wearing pink too - today is Pink Shirt Day, an acknowledgement of anti-bullying and a day to stand in solidarity. The movement was started by two high school students out in Nova Scotia, and has become a nationwide day.

Our office is in touch with your team probably all the time, everyday we get a lot of emails and phone calls about snow and ice. Of course we're a major winter city. So this is a very, really common topic for all Edmontonians. And I'm really glad you can spend an hour here with me. First, I just wanted you to say hello and share, why do you do what you do? And what do you love about parks and roads?

CM: Thank you for having me. I'm the branch manager for parks and roads services. We have a large team, there are about 2000 employees in the branch who support a diverse set of programs that we run - everything from turf maintenance, spring sweep, snow and ice control, trimming trees, cutting grass, streetlights, traffic lights and street signs, pavement markings, potholes. All the things that are outside and impact everyone's day to day life. So to answer your question, why do we do what I do? I love to lead team's, work with people. And think about how do we make things better? How do we make things more efficient? How do I improve the lives of those who work for the city? And then in turn, how do we make the lives better for Edmontonians.

I've worked for the city for a number of years, started in transit with the LRT system, in waste services, and now in parks and roads. The best part is talking to Edmontonians. I was working in waste when the cart rollout was taking place, chatting with family, friends, neighbours, talking about how carts are getting rolled out. And the same thing with our LRT system, talking about how transit works. And with parks and roads, I feel like, everywhere you look, there's something that parks and roads touches and it's in everybody's day to day lives, and especially snow and ice. You can't leave your house without thinking about it and it changes your life. And I think there are a lot of opportunities to make Edmontonians' lives better.

KT: I bet you're popular parties - always talking about the things that affect us. You've been in lots of really fun public facing roles. So currently in the team of 2000. How many of those would you say are frontline workers?

CM: The vast majority are frontline staff. For snow and ice in particular, there's about 600 folks who maintain roads and active pathways across Edmonton. The vast majority are also still out filling potholes even in the winter. We still trim trees in the winter. We have a large seasonal workforce in the summer, we really have our highest numbers in the branch in the summertime. But the vast majority are frontline staff.

KT: So you're looking at services that impact everybody's lives.

CM: Yeah, absolutely. I think I saw a headline about how the number of potholes we filled this year is five times the number last year, just to indicate how much work that does happen even in the winter that we don't always think about. We notice all the potholes that aren't yet filled, but there's 1000's that get filled everyday. [no closed captioning]. When you do a really good job, people don't notice it. It's noticed when we miss something.

KT: Yeah, absolutely. I really appreciate all the services that people provide. They're super critical. And on our snow policy there's a bit of a long history to this isn't there? It's not just something we've enacted this year or last year. It's a fairly large, I will say policy. So I guess first of all, where can people learn more about it?

CM: Yeah, we got two main documents that drive what we do, we have a snow and ice control policy, and then we have an administrative procedure. So the policy is really about the why, and let's, and our procedures is more about how we do it, and what service levels Edmontonians can expect. Both of those are publicly available, you can find them on [Edmonton.ca/safetravels](https://edmonton.ca/safetravels). What we tried to do was really distill down information to Edmontonians. What matters to you, what do you care about, and put it in a mailed and we mailed that out to every household in December, and that can also be found online. But that really shows the services that we do. And what should Edmontonians expect of us. And really, what that boils down to is, how fast should you expect us to clear priority one arterial roads? And how often do we maintain collector roads and alleyways? And that's what we hold ourselves accountable to, is to the service levels.

KT: Yeah, I remember seeing that mailer in my mailbox at home. And we've definitely gotten some feedback as well, from the community. And there's a lot of questions of why - why this type of road is priority four, or why does the active pathway have these priority levels. And oftentimes that 'why' that goes back to the policy itself, which is publicly available. It's a lot to dig into, but it is there and a goal for today is to dig into a little bit, maybe share what people know or don't know, and where to find more of that information.

So can you talk a little bit about the changes to this particular policy over the last few years? How many times have you been trying to modify it? What are some of the major changes? What is new and noteworthy?

CM: The policies are approved by the City Council. The Snow and Ice control policies have been in place since the 70s. It's been reviewed and updated a number of times over the years, trying to find some changes. What the policy really shows is what are our guiding principles and what are our key outcomes. So our key outcomes from the policy, which was most recently updated in August of 2021. The three key outcomes are safety, reliability, and connectivity. And then the policy also outlines our five guiding principles, which are operational excellence, environmental stewardship, equity, shared responsibility, and public awareness and understanding. And part of me joining this discussion today is on that public awareness and understanding. And I feel like those who are here today are doing their part in terms of shared responsibility and, happy to share more details about snow and ice.

Some of the key things that took place over the last number of years, is we took a lot of operational details from the policy and moved that into the administrative procedure. And so that was really to try to differentiate the 'why' and 'what' are we here for, and then 'how' we do is in the administrative procedure. So the policy at this point, likely won't change often. However, funding levels and inventory details and things like that, in terms of how many roads we have, might change some of the service levels, or how we go about doing it and how we want to

adjust our procedures based on things like climate change. Or if we have more active pathways and roadways, or however the city evolves and changes, we can update the procedure in terms of how we want to clear the snow.

KT: And all of that will be guided by the council approved policy, which is more around why and what are we doing. And so I think, you know, it's a good thing that policy's do evolve to be responsive to the changes in our city and in our community. So the last change was last summer. And I think we really had this commitment to give the team the full year to really test out how this policy really rolls out. Because I think shortly after the election, there's a lot of debate about how can we improve. I think Council did try to intervene and it actually wasn't that great. And I think there was a commitment to really give you the power and space to see that policy through, because we don't know what those changes are. But in the past, there's been a number of other changes.

Although I'm curious, what did the city do before the 1970s? Before the policy was in place? Did we not remove snow?

CM: That's a good question. I wouldn't have been around then. But I can imagine the snow still getting moved. Just perhaps not under a Council, the City Council approved policies. So I really think there has been some formalities and some more guidance that's been added as the city's grown, as our city has kind of evolved over time.

KT: Yeah, that's right.

CM: We have city staff who have been around for a long time. Who've been involved in the snow and ice program for decades. And we lean on them for expertise and advice all the time. How do we do this? Does this make sense? How would you do it? You've been here for decades, you've been here longer than I've been alive. How's the best way to approach this type of weather condition?

KT: I've always heard people talk about this handbook that people really relied on. And I wondered if that handbook came out before the 70s or after the 70s. So I'm sure there's a story there.

One thing you know, that's feedback we hear a lot from people is that we are a Winter city or Canadian Winter city, why can't we figure it out? We also know our winter context is actually quite different. And your team has done a bit of a comparison against other cities. Do you want to maybe talk about that a little bit? And how would you respond to feedback like that?

CM: I hear that too. I first say that Edmonton's climate and our winters are unpredictable. We get a whole variety of weather conditions. And it always provides different unique challenges. This winter has been quite a bit different than last winter in terms of freeze thaw cycles and quantity of snow. What I will mention though, is we are a 24/7 operation. So anytime it snows the crews are out.

I do a lot of jurisdictional scanning to compare ourselves to some of the other municipalities across Canada, but also across the world. In terms of how our climate stacks up against places like Montreal, Winnipeg, we've looked at areas in Switzerland as well.

KT: We always compare ourselves to Calgary. Calgary has the Chinook which makes the conditions quite different from here. And I think we often talk about Montreal but Montreal also has a budget, that's three times ours. And during the budget discussion, unfortunately, we did not approve funding that's three times our current budget. But we did give this area a modest increase since the budget has stayed relatively the same for the last while even as the city has continued to grow.

CM: The weather is different, the size of our city is different. And it's changed. So the quantity of roads and pathways have dramatically increased. And the different types of equipment that we need has changed and evolved. So there's been a lot of changes we do hear though "why can't we do it just like we did 15 years ago" And the reality is the situation has changed.

KT: The other thing I was gonna say was we're really spread out. And our inventory is huge, like, the amount of roads you know, something between here to Newfoundland and back, right? And is that a usual thing for a city to have?

CM: It is. And what we've done is we've also done some jurisdictional scanning around other cities per capita, and we do have a large amount of inventory, we have a lot of roads, just pulling up a number right now. The amount of roads we have would take you to Montreal and back just in our city.

And we also maintain city maintained sidewalks, multi-use trails, city facilities, staircases, everything outside of a roadway. So we also maintain 6500 bus stops, 44 kilometers of bike lanes. And then we fill 769 public sandboxes. But the amount of inventory that crews maintain has certainly grown for a city of 1 million people.

KT: So let's talk about this winter. There are still definitely warm periods then freezing periods, like what we are right now. And then the temperatures are gonna go back up again, this weekend. And then even for a while back there, there's a warm period where the streets were just complete slush for several weeks. And I think that was one we were looking at a phase 2 parking ban for the residential clearing. And there's a bit of delay there. It definitely hasn't been the same volume of calls and emails compared to last year. But I think the issues we're hearing this year are very, very different. We don't have the same blading down to pavement, huge accumulation of windrows. But this year, I think we're hearing a lot more around the notifications, around enforcement. So can you talk a little bit about how you feel we did this year in terms of the response? And why we implemented the measures that we did?

CM: Yeah, I would say, the crews, I thought they did a fantastic job of delivering on the program that we built. I feel like there's always room for improvement on the program. And that's on me,

that's on our team to adjust. We need to be responsive to climate change, we need to be responsive to Edmontonians. And, so a number of different topics.

I would say last year, we had an abnormal amount of freeze-thaw cycles, which contributed to significant ice. This year, we had significant snowfall, and then really cool periods in December. And then in January, we had significant periods of really warm weather. So some of the issues that we ran into, in December through Christmas and early January, was windrows and school zones. And so based on the snowfall at the time, we prioritized the picking up of windrows and seeing how many we can get cleared in the early January timeframe. When the weather warmed up, one of the big challenges that we ran into was the residential roads. And we saw a lot of feedback in terms of that oatmeal slushy conditions that were bad. And that was unacceptable.

And this is where we really leaned on a lot of our frontline staff, their expertise in terms of, you know, this isn't the first time we've dealt with something like this, what's our best approach in this particular instance, at this particular time. And at the time, we learned a lot from last year in terms of blading the pavement, the windrows that we created, and the catch basins like the sewer drains that were blocked. So we wanted to be very careful not to repeat those same mistakes that were still very fresh in our minds. And the concern was sending the heavy trucks into the residential zones when it was very soft.

The thought process was really getting larger ruts. And we wanted to be cognizant of not creating large windrows, not creating catch basin blockage issues again. So we kept a really close eye on the weather and that's something that another thing that we do is we utilize spot weather stations around the city and we also partnered with the U of A for black ice detection systems. So we are trying to leverage technology in that aspect as well to assist the decision making. We really wanted to avoid those issue, so we tried holding off, finishing up windrows in school zones, and then shifting to the residential program with the intention of it being warmer. We couldn't wait. The feedback was mounting. And that's not what Edmontonians expected. So we needed to respond. And so that's the other thing, is being adaptable to needs and weather conditions, climate change. So we shifted and started our residential program. We tried to mitigate the concerns around catch basins and curb cuts and driveways by sending in different vehicles, like Bobcats to help clear those at the same time. We tried to hold it off, there was a lot of thought process and deliberation around the best way we can approach this situation, and not make it worse and revisit the same issues as we did in the previous year. So that was a little bit that went into the approach for residential.

KT: I want to jump in there. Because I think in one of our other conversations you mentioned that this is one of the first two years we've ever really done phase two parking ban. So prior to that, what do we do with residential streets?

CM: We would still have parking bans in arterials and collectors, we just wouldn't have a parking ban in residential. Then as of two years ago we had a parking ban that wasn't enforced. There were warnings last year, but there were no fines. So ticketing in enforcement was a new

measure. And that team is in a different department and is a different team. But there's a lot of coordination between the two and right now once phase two is over, you're really getting to the cul-de-sac clearing.

KT: So I do have a question here cul-de-sacs. They get one clearing the entire season in their neighborhood, despite the calls to 311. Can you talk a little bit about why? I remember cul-de-sacs had a lot of discussions. And I remember a lot of the Councillors who represent the suburbs had a lot of feedback on cul-de-sacs last year. So can you just talk a little bit about the thinking behind cul-de-sacs?

CM: We've got 1000's of cul-de-sacs across the city. We are scheduled to have final pickups done tomorrow, we are a week ahead of schedule in terms of pickup. How we build out our program - it's based on budgets. So what we have funding levels for dictate how many staff we can hire permanently or seasonally, our advancements, windrow pick-up, cul-de-sac pick-up. [no closed captioning]. So we build the program based on what is fiscally responsible for us to deliver based on the budget that we have. So right now our program is built and we're funded to do 1 pickup across 6000 cul-de-sacs. So essentially, if people want to do more cul-de-sac pickup, then we need more funding for it.

KT: That's right

CM: Now what we can do is we can depending on the situation, and this kind of speaks to the flexibility. If we were to shift resources to do a second cul-de-sac pick up, what that would do is pull crews away from doing other things, like clearing snow. What's important to know is even when it's not snowing crews are busy. They're consistently doing maintenance, sanding. [no closed captioning]. Crews are always out fully utilized and when there's instances where they aren't we can shift teams to different paths. And that's what we've been doing. So crews are always busy. But if we were to shift to a second round of cul-de-sac clearing that would pull away from the other services.

KT: One thing I will say about the budget, last year council had a lot of discussions about the budget or how we want to approach the policy. And essentially Craigs team presented us with a menu to say, if you want this particular service, like if you want multiple cul-de-sac pickup, this is how much that will cost and these are some considerations. If you want all sidewalks cleared this is the cost of that. I actually found that whole process extremely intimidating, because, as not a frontline worker, I feel like I didn't have the expertise to say this is better than that service, etc. And what I really wanted to see was just a more agile response, that our frontline workers are empowered to make some real time decisions in the moments, you know, if they're speaking with seniors in a cul-de-sac, who's having such trouble with a windrows, could they just help them out and move them out of the way. Some of the impressions that I got from last year talking to some of the workers was that I think people didn't necessarily feel empowered. And I think that was some change I wanted to see happening this year, that frontlines can make those real time decisions. Do you feel that that is improving based on your conversations with staff members?

CM: That's exactly the type of culture that we try to instill - allowing those in our vehicles to be able to make decisions. That makes sense. And so if the route needs to be changed, if they need to do two passes in an alleyway - make that decision. I was just up in the Northwest area last Friday, and I was listening in to the morning orders where they hand out the pieces of work to various crews and that got brought up. If the alley needs to be cleared on the fly, do what makes sense. So I'm starting to see that now from my leaders to those who are going to be operating the equipment. They know that if it needs another pass in order to provide that quality that Edmontonians expect.

More broad in terms of how the program should be run - we would like that flexibility. We know climate change is a reality. We know winters are unpredictable. Sticking to a strict schedule is likely not the best approach. So what we tried to do last year was really be responsive to direction in terms of what the services that Edmontonians would like to see. But it's tough to pick from a menu of options when you don't know the weather conditions. And really empowering those who have been operating the equipment, who are watching the weather, being on the roads is likely the most efficient.

KT: That's good to hear. And I'm always encouraging that, so whatever you're doing to promote that culture, please continue. And, you know, we've also gotten some really positive feedback from community members when staff members do help out in the moment, sometimes that might be a little bit different from their usual route. And I know people appreciate that so much.

Just a little bit on enforcement, because you know, we were definitely much more aggressive this year in terms of the fine amount, in terms of not just a warning, but actually ticketing there. There is a dispute process if people don't necessarily agree with it. So can you talk about what's new this year with the parking bans? And we do have a new notification system. I think there's a pretty significant uptake on that, but why did we put in this notification system?

CM: Maybe I'll start by saying we as a city do not want to give tickets - that is absolutely not the intention. The intention is to encourage compliance. To get the vehicles off the road. It is drastically more efficient for an operator to clear snow if curbs are cleared. So that's really the intention behind it.

The bylaw enforcement team does not fall within the branch. However, we do work very closely with them. And so we deliver on the operations and maintenance side of things and our bylaw enforcement teams are the ones who enforce that bylaw. And so they'll make judgment calls in terms of, you know, snow on sidewalks or if your vehicle is parked and when to do warnings and tickets and all that, that decision will be made at the peace officer level. But really the intention there was to encourage compliance. We are trying a whole bunch of things. The notification system - we are between 30 and 40,000 subscribers at this point. You can sign up at edmonton.ca/safetravels. We've found areas for improvement, where people might have made a spelling mistake in their email and didn't notice it, or registered an account but didn't add their address to get to the phase two parking ban notification. So we want to make it as clear as

possible so you can have that notification, whether it's a text or email. And the vast majority of the time it worked out well. We did get a lot of accolades in terms of "Hey I got a text, moved my car" and "I saw the truck, got the text and put my car back". And that's exactly how we're trying to deliver this. And so there were a few hiccups with the number that sent out texts, there were a couple of delays here and there, the vast majority of it worked out well. So we're going to continue to refine them, and we're also thinking of other things.

You know, we've heard about signage. Signage wasn't enough. And so we've ordered about 800 more signs, we're gonna change the color as well. So they're bright yellow, and very obvious. And it's not just at the main entrances, but we're going to just going to put them out there and make it so clear, if you're driving or walking by that 'hey there is a parking ban'. That'll be a compliment to the notification tool. And one of the ideas we're still brainstorming is a jingle car, like an ice cream truck.

KT: And I think once you told me that the signs were really at the entrance of neighborhoods, I was noticing them a lot more frequently. Whereas previously lots of people said that they didn't see those signs in the neighborhood. And I think once I saw it at the entrance, I did notice it a lot more. I mean, I will say last year, we we heard a lot of complaints about people not moving their vehicle and it actually just made the plowing worse for everybody on the streets. And so it's not a small issue. I think it is kind of a key one and recognizing affordability is really high on people's mind. The fine is significant, although it does bring it in line with other fines that the city has for other things. And I think the best thing is to move your car.

I do have a question here about car parking in general. But I think this is a pattern we see lots of. People park in the streets, we've seen that even during a snowfall, even if you have a garage, people still like to park on the street. As a city, we allow people to do that. But in the winter time we're hearing lots of complaints because of the windrow build up, especially in neighborhoods that don't have boulevards, the windrows pile up onto essentially parking spaces. So the cars are parked closer into the center of the road, making it much more dangerous. Can you comment on that? And what are some of the provisions you can do?

CM: I wish all neighborhoods had boulevards. I believe most of the neighborhoods in the ward you represent have boulevards.

KT: Yeah, a lot of them don't.

CM: I look at design as a big thing, you need to think where is the snow gonna go? And seeing neighborhoods built without boulevards is tricky. Every neighborhood in St. Albert has a boulevard and they're large, and they now blade to the pavement and have massive windrows. But it's on a boulevard and it works. And it doesn't in Edmonton when it goes directly from the road into sidewalk. It's tricky. That is really the largest reason, or one of the largest reasons why Edmonton maintains a five centimeters snowpack. One of the many reasons I should say why we maintain a five centimeter snowpack is to have that spread out on the road. If we can maintain a five centimeter snowpack, we can minimize the size of a windrow, especially in those

neighborhoods that don't have a boulevard So sometimes when we're grooming the snowpack, if it's soft and the windrow is large, it'll spill onto the sidewalk. And that's on us to fix, we do send crews back to clear that up. We are incredibly responsive to 311 notifications when those come in.

KT: Do you think the answer is to not allow street parking in general? Would that help? I can't imagine, but I think people are wondering are there not just parking bans for the sake of plowing, but maybe parking provisions, for example, not parking on the street overnight. I've had those questions. And sometimes it's not just on residential streets, even on bus routes, sometimes there's no boulevards. You know, I think I've had a long conversation this morning with one resident who lives on a bus route. And the windrows are actually kind of plowed on the two sides, going into sidewalks, but also blocking kind of access to the bus pad and mailbox and whatnot. And especially for seniors who just have such challenges with removing those pieces, it just makes life very difficult throughout the winter time. So those are just kind of things that I'm hearing as well.

CM: I think not allowing parking on roads would certainly make the operations easier. That said, I also think Edmontonians are passionate about where they park. And we're here to serve Edmontonians. So if Edmontonians need park in front of their house, I see that as on us to figure out how can we do this? How can we navigate this? I think right now, the balance we have right now is very targeted parking bans. And there's room for improvement on how we deliver that. But I feel like that's probably the balance that we've struck right now is park where you can, we will do targeted parking bans, with the intention of making it as efficient and cost effective as possible for us to clear roads in the best possible way as fast as possible. We're also looking at could we/should we use parking bans for spring sweep? Would that make it easier? Could it be faster? And the intention of what do Edmontonians want, and what is a reasonable amount of participation from Edmontonians to make our operations more efficient? It is really on us to provide that service. But moving your vehicle is a relatively simple thing to do to make the whole operation drastically more cost effective for them. That's the balance. I think the broader concern here is parking next to windrows affects road safety, just in terms of traffic.

KT: I do have a question here about snow clearing budgets not being adequate. It's Council responsibility to set the overall budget. Do you want to comment on the sort of trends with budgets and the snow removal budget. What is it right now? What was the last time the budget saw a significant change? What was the budget prior to the fall? Actually, you know, what is the current budget for snow removal? Let's start there.

CM: I'll pull up the numbers here. It's roughly about \$60 million.

KT: What was it last year? I think it was in the range of \$50 million.

CM: The tricky part of the snow and ice control budget is, we budget by fiscal year but a winter process too. So there's a little bit of nuance, in terms of where the calendar year and where the

snow season takes place. If we think back to 2018, it would have been closer to \$65 million. There were 4 years of subsequent decreases to the budget and there's a variety of reasons to that. So the budget trended downwards from 2018 to 2022. There was a number of one-time funding increases in 2022, one was around the blading to the pavement pilot, that was about \$16 million. And then there are some one-time funding of \$4.7 million that would have put administration on a path towards that R1/AP1 Council report that we did in the summer.

KT: Just having more services, essentially?

CM: So the budget in 2022, if you include the one-time funding pieces around blading pilot, and the one-time to put us on that trajectory towards increasing services, I believe it would be closer to \$78 million. And now we have our four-year budget set between 2023 and 2026. And it's increasing the base budget. So I threw a lot of numbers out there. I can follow up with some more specifics, but the budget essentially trended downwards, there was a one-time spike, and it's going to be slowly moving back up. We will be coming back to City Council in June to talk about how well we did in terms of KPI's or metrics, how well we performed, and then what the snow and ice control programs will look like going forward based on the funding levels we received at budget in December.

KT: There's lots of reasons for why it trended downward since 2018. But I imagine one of those was fiscal constraints, because back then I think there were a number of cuts at the city. And I guess, yes, we could have funded everything that was on this menu that we're talking about. But at the same time, like you said, we don't actually know how the winter is going to roll out and whether or not all those things on the menu will be used. And so, I think there's some misperception out there that the budget has decreased, that we cut funding further from snow. And that is not true. So there is a steady increase, it may not have been the same kind of budget allocation as presented last summer. But it is a percentage increase. And I guess my own take on that is work as a team, and figure out what are some of those real-time decisions that workers can make and how do you work within the resources you're given to deliver that service. And that's the kind of problem solving that you're doing with your team every day, right?

CM: That's right. At the end of the day, we need to provide the best service, we can have Edmontonians. At the same time, we need to work within our means. And so we need to be fiscally responsible with how we spend those resources, how we hire, how we deliver the service. And so we're constantly trying to find efficiencies to make the best use of taxpayer dollars.

KT: And as part of the four-year budget process, you were weighed up against a lot of other services that are also just as needed. But it is interesting, because we talk about budget in the wintertime, so snow is really top of mind for people. Just in the last little bit, I was wondering if you can touch on accessibility issues. This was a key feature, and a number of council members actually didn't support the budget overall because they didn't feel the provision to improve accessibility was adequately addressed through the budget decision. With the city, there has been a few announcements of different programs, for

example, snow-to-go, which I think really responds to sidewalks. So can you talk a little bit about the ways we're trying to support seniors and people with disabilities?

CM: So there's a few things that we as a city have. Some are delivered as a program within parks and roads, but then we also have our Community Services department that has certain grants, and I can speak to those as well, all of which are to support community accessibility. So I'd say the first thing is our active pathway team. So we've got our teams broken down to those who maintain roads, and those who means active pathways. So they're the team that would clear sidewalks in front of city property, City Hall, bus stops, those types of things.

KT: And those are smaller equipment too. They're a different category, and it's different personnel because its different equipment?

CM: Exactly. And we can interchange depending on how priorities are, so we use folks from the active pathway group when we were doing the residential blading program or residential grooming program in small equipments like bobcats because pathways needed to be cleared. So we were able to reallocate certain road tasks. But in general, we have a dedicated team for active pathways. We also support the accessibility placard program. I encourage residents to look that up online or through 311 and they can verbally walk you through that process. But what that would provide is we can put stakes in front of your house, and have either a no windrow zone, or something like that if there was mobility concerns. Not just if there's a disability, but if you have a broken leg or something like that, and you needed to make sure there was no windrow in front of your house, there's a process that the city follows to support that placard program. The community snow to go program, that's a grant to the community league. So that was administered out of our community services team. But it's a grant that goes to the community leagues who can then either contract or hire or have volunteers to help with snow clearing outside your home. The community leagues actually have a lot of different programs. So I encourage residents to have a look at the different services that community leagues can provide.

KT: Do you know how many leagues participated this year? I'm curious, because it's not everybody and the leagues have to sign up as well. And not all leagues have a hall or shed to store the equipment, because they're not necessarily small items. But I am curious about that one. Do you have a number?

CM: I don't have that number in front of me, sorry.

KT: We've been talking about this as well. And hopefully more people know about it, and that they can subscribe to that service. I found out recently with Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council, they do have a home support and home care program for seniors, because not all seniors have disabilities or a broken leg and they probably can't qualify for those placards. But you know, some of the funding in recent years for the home support program is if you do have challenges with sidewalk clearing, or especially for sidewalk clearing, you can contact the home support worker at your local senior center who can connect you with services. And depending

on your income level, there's also subsidy provided. So if people want to know how to ask us that, you know, please let us know.

There was some commentary too about people noticing that when there was a warmer spells, streets were fairly dry, but you still see Bobcats driving around and there's spark blading. What's going on there? Do they need to be out? Do they need to be doing that? You know, people are wondering, is there a way to save some money for the city? Do you want to comment on that?

CM: Yeah, we field a lot of questions around that. "I saw a truck driving by, it didn't have its blade down, it wasn't sanding - what was it doing" or "I saw a small equipment driving by, I didn't see it doing anything, what was going on"? I say to that, we have trucks all over the place going to and from, oftentimes, they're going to a certain location to do targeted sanding, or to be moving windows back, making pathways wider. We're very responsive to 311 around catch basins and blockages. So sometimes we'll have GPS locations that different vehicles need to attend to. So they might be targeting certain areas and then commuting to the next location where the next notification might be. But there's a whole variety of different tasks. And some of the things we will also hear is there is a lot of snowfall, but I'm not seeing plows. And I get that because sometimes on my commute to work, I don't see a plow either. But what we'll do is we'll prioritize different roads. So priority one roads, you'll see are the first things. Major arterials, the Whitemud, the Yellowhead, the larger areas first and then priority two will be after. You know, volume, safety, speeds are other factors. So although you might not see the vehicle or even expect it, I can assure you they're out.

There's a few things that we're trying to do that we're working on right now to better enable Edmontonians to have a look at things. One is we are GPS-ing all of our vehicles and we're working on a live map that can be able to see where all the vehicles are at any given time including the named ones. We want to see Amar-sleet Snow-hi or Connor Mc-Bladeit. You can look it up in real time and see where it is, be able to see when it was last plowed, so different color coding, you know, if its green it was done in the last 12 hours, that kind of thing. And we're working on more interactive maps so Edmontonians could just go on the map, see when the road is scheduled to be plowed, when was the last plow, where are the plows right now. We want to show Edmontonians real time what it is we're doing. Those are a couple of things that we're trying to improve transparency.

KT: I was gonna say, I mean, I think all of that is in the spirit of making sure that we do have open information that people can easily access. And they are conduits for people to provide feedback. And we always remind people to use the 311 line because they're directly connected to yards, who can then really directly convey that concern to the people who are actually on the streets doing the service. And you know, if necessary, let our office know so that we can follow up.

Just by the way on that name a plow contest. I think in the past, we've gotten questions around. Is this really necessary? How much does something like this cost? And it's a bit of a communication and branding exercise, and I get that in a pretty dreary winter, we sometimes

need something a little bit more celebratory when it comes to snow and ice. How do you respond to feedback like that?

CM: I totally get that. We're constantly trying to be fiscally responsible with taxpayer dollars. The name a plow program was incredibly cheap. We did it all with internal resources, we have a sign shop that can print stickers, we really leveraged our internal staff. And it was just a side project on top of people's typical day job. So the quantity of money that went into it was incredibly low. And it was fun. I feel like what it did do was, it did give us opportunity to speak about the snow and ice control program in a positive way. But also give some attention to it. And I feel like it got the conversation going in terms of being able to speak to the program. We got a lot of questions about the name a plow contest, which then immediately lead into other topics. And so it provides an opportunity to say, here's the things we are doing. And I feel like one of the things we need to get better at, and this is the culture we're trying to build is, be more proactive and messaging out what it is we are doing, and not waiting for an inquiry or complaint, but be more transparent. Here's all the things we're thinking about. We're already thinking about spring sweep. We're already thinking about the fall classic. We are doing these things. I think we need to do a better job of communicating that out.

KT: I appreciate that. I'm just mindful of time. We're pretty much on the dot here. And I will say year you did a bunch of media availabilities, which I don't know if it's something that we typically do. Is this is something that we do?

CM: There have been years past where we do daily media, weekly media, its varied depending on the appetite. I would love to talk about snow and ice every single day. But I also realize that we're not the only thing going on at the city.

KT: I appreciate your time, and appreciate everybody who is listening or watching this the next day or later after it is over. I guess the bottom line is that snow removal isn't just the simple service that we think it is. There's a lot involved. There's a lot of people involved. We didn't even touch on things like community sandbox, snow storage, there was a whole report about snow storage and why we can't just use storm water ponds for storage due to environmental considerations. So that we can end on a positive know, what would you say you're most proud of this year as a milestone?

CM: I'm most proud of how frontline staff and the management team have delivered on this year's program. It sounds odd to say we are proud of decreased quantities of complaints. But that is what we're tracking. We want to provide the best service we can, teams are constantly working late hours and doing everything they can to provide the best service. The passion with Edmontonians is high. And we get that and we want to be able to provide the best service we can. I would say the amount of initiative and dedication that the city staff have been providing every day is pretty remarkable. So if you get the opportunity to ever thank someone who's operating a vehicle, please do because they're definitely working hard.