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# WHY DOES WINTER WEATHER CLOSE THE COUNTY DOWN?

There were 21 reported car crashes on the morning of Dec. 8, mostly from drivers taking their morning commute along the Beltline or Delta Highways through Eugene. Early last February, a similar icy dawn on area roads caused 15 car crashes. As of Dec. 13, the National Weather Service predicts below-freezing temperatures for a span of several nights (Dec. 14 to 17), meaning drivers are again venturing out into black ice and Christmas lights.

Why, pray tell, does Lane County shut down and the roads go wild with crashes when Old Man Winter comes calling? Somehow Canada and Wisconsin manage to keep functioning once snow and ice hit. Further, what public road resources jump in to save us all from Carmageddon each year?

Orin Schumacher is the road maintenance manager for Lane County — an expanse of almost 1,400 miles of road. He heads up five sub-county regions including the coast and a mountain range.

He says that drivers in our area are simply not used to reckoning with an icy roadway, as it is a rare event. A classic trouble area in Eugene is the steep, curved hill up 30th Avenue, where Lane Community College is located. Thousands of students drive or bus up this grade each day.

“We partner with the city to de-ice it from the city over to I-5. We are going to be de-icing that over the next couple days,” Schumacher says of 30th. “If anything is to freeze, hopefully the road will be unfrozen.”

High accident areas in the county are the Beltline and Delta Highways, I-5, Lorane Highway, 30th Avenue, the residential hilly areas of southeast and southwest Eugene and, of course, Highway 126 out to coastal Florence.

Unlike eastern Oregon or eastern Washington, which feature lots of heavy long-lasting snows through rural lands, the Willamette Valley has much more urban density and per-acre road surface. “I don’t know if they necessarily have more plows than we do; we have more population and more miles,” Schumacher says.

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*‘There were mostly merging accidents where people hit an ice spot and lost control driving too fast for the conditions.’*  
 — ORIN SCHUMACHER, LANE COUNTY

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 Not only are area drivers not used to icy weather, another factor is the city doesn’t have a “bare pavement” policy, meaning “operations are intended to provide the prudent motorist with a reasonably safe traveling surface.” Drivers then make classic blunders that would normally pass in better driving conditions, like following too closely or making sudden lane changes.

“There were mostly merging accidents where people hit

an ice spot and lost control driving too fast for the conditions,” Schumacher says of the Dec. 8 accidents.

The city of Eugene has seven dump trucks for its 538 miles of city asphalt; some are capable of plowing while others are capable of de-icing or sanding. In comparison, the similarly sized city of Salem has nine dump trucks, with seven snow plows available.

Schumacher says of the current winter weather, “Almost all week they are calling for temperatures to drop into the high 20s and the teens by the weekend. If the roads are dry, county road crews will put out magnesium chloride on roads where we have the potential for ice to form.”

Oregon uses magnesium chloride, a chemical salt, not rock salt, aka sodium chloride, which is more corrosive and harder on the environment.

The decision to close LCC or the 4J school district for a snow day takes place *early*.

“By four or five in the morning, I’ve already talked to Public Safety to see what campus looks like,” says Brian Kelly, vice president of college services at LCC. “We are also checking in with the county and sheriff offices to see if there have been weather-related accidents.”

Kelly says his staff checks to see if Lane Transit District buses are running and if the 4J school district is open, as many LCC students use the bus to reach the college.

Similarly, the 4J school district administration faces the same difficult choice on icy days, as the sprawling district daily buses thousands of children through urban and rural roads.

“We are dealing with pretty different terrains in our district. We have hilly areas where you can’t run buses safely through them in snow,” says Kerry Delf, public information officer for the 4J school district. “We do have built-in chain systems on all of our buses. They do have the capacity to be safe in snowy weather,” Delf says. ■



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