Plow drivers deal with un-fun part of Tahoe snowstorms

By Kathryn Reed

Bouncing. Snowplows can do this even though the machines literally weigh a ton and then some. Even with chains on all six tires, if they are carrying enough snow, especially uphill, it's far from a smooth ride. And these monsters also slide.

Operating heavy equipment isn't easy under the best of conditions. Best of conditions for a plow driver would be adequate visibility, no obstacles and a road surface that doesn't resemble a Zamboni having just cleared a sheet of ice.

It's Feb. 17 and the snow is dumping in South Lake Tahoe. Visibility is less than ideal. Vehicles are coming and going, and this contraption is supposed to zig and zag to accommodate them. Mailboxes are on the edge of driveways looking like targets.

Visibility is lacking for snowplow drivers during a storm. Photos/Kathryn Reed

With 130 miles of streets to clear in the city limits, the 16 plow drivers work 12-hour shifts (6 to 6) at times when it’s dumping like it has been for the past few days. The city is divvied up into routes, with a team working a particular route.

It’s a little before 6pm in the employee room at the snowplow yard. Dennis Hillyard is telling Bobby Maxwell what the day shift was like, what he accomplished, how the machine is operating. Something isn’t quite right with big blue so Maxwell takes an older machine that rattles onto the streets of South Lake Tahoe.

Before he leaves the yard Maxwell tests the hydraulics. It’s a bit like a pilot going through a checklist.

The instrument panel is not as complex as that of an airplane, but there is certainly more to do at all times while the machine is in motion. No autopilot on this rig.

Five controls on the left, six on the right and the foot pedals require dexterity, concentration and quick thinking. Plus, there are levers to the right dealing with front wheel drive and being able to lock the rear axels. Windshield wipers clear – though not well – the moisture from the glass on top and below. The radio to home base is to the left.

There’s the plow in front, the belly blade and the gate to contend with on the machine.

That’s what these guys, and it is a male dominated profession, contend with just in their small sphere that is not designed to carry a passenger.

Outside their sphere of influence are driveways, intersections, drainage areas, street signs, mailboxes and vehicles.

And then there’s the public. Some don’t know how to drive in

the snow. Some don’t care their vehicle is on the edge of the driveway looking close to losing a front bumper. Some people come out to stare. Others throw their arms up in disbelief about the berm that just got left.

“There’s never anything positive from the public when you’re plowing,” Maxwell says.

He’s had people chase him in their vehicles. He doesn’t stop; thinking nothing good could come of the confrontation.

But that doesn’t mean he is callous about leaving a berm. He said he and co-workers do their best, but when it’s coming down as fast has it has been with this storm, the accumulation means the snow has to go some place.

“You can only carry so much snow,” Maxwell explains. “The gate really only reduces the berm. It does not eliminate it.”

Headed up Bode Drive off Pioneer Trail the machine is resisting, it’s bouncing a bit. That driveway is going to be bermed. The gate, the device that is used to avoid berms, has to be released. And simple physics prove plows can only carry so much snow before it spills over.

Houses on the right corner of an intersection are apt to receive the biggest berms. Such are the hazards of the plows having to clear an intersection, with some of that snow from the street getting dumped right away.

People who plow their snow into the street – which violates a city ordinance – are apt to get a larger berm because it’s just more snow that has to be moved out of the street.

It’s not one pass that Maxwell makes on what is called the Heavenly route. He said he and Hillyard are about quality, not the distance.

Other operations

South Tahoe plow drivers are responsible for all the city streets, while Caltrans contends with all state highways, just as NDOT does the highways in Nevada.

In El Dorado County, the main arterial roadways and school bus routes are the priorities when it comes to clearing the 158 miles on the South Shore. The county also has 35 miles of pavement in the Tahoma area to contend with.

“We have been hit by the budget to some degree, but it is not affecting snow removal operations,” said Tom Celio, El Dorado County deputy director of maintenance and operations.

The county also runs two 12-hour shifts and breaks the work into zones.

Douglas County is only responsible for a handful of streets at the lake, which is done by two private contractors. The rest of the South Shore is either covered by homeowners associations (like in Glenbrook) or general improvement districts (like the streets off Kingsbury Grade). Douglas County School District plows Warrior Way for the schools along there.

Once the streets all get plowed, then the blowers come out in all the jurisdictions. The guys driving the blowers are the same ones who had been in the plows.

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