

Searching for a better way: An Alaskan Experience

In 2015, when oil prices hit record lows, drivers were enjoying the low prices at the gas pump while the State of Alaska's coffers were running on empty. Alaska's economy, largely dependent on revenue from its oil pipeline, took a huge hit that year that resulted in about a one-fifth reduction in the Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities' operating budget—one of a series of budget cuts that would continue over the next several years. Winter maintenance, the department said, would look different this year. As a fully state-funded activity, there simply wouldn't be any money for overtime. Our regularly scheduled station hours are the hours our operators work. That means no nights, no weekends, no holidays. The public was warned. Unfortunately, Mother Nature didn't get the message.

In late September of that year, Fairbanks received its first real storm of the season, an event that lasted over 35 hours in duration. No overtime, the department said. We simply don't have the money, our hands are tied. The roads were a mess and the public was not buying into this new reality. We were forced, under the most difficult of situations, to ask ourselves, is this the best we can do?

Fast forward to 2018, with several more years of cuts under our belts, and the new reality looked quite a bit different. At the Fairbanks Station, we made sure our operators knew as many details of our budget issues and our decision-making process as possible so they could help us work toward a positive solution. We defined the "what" and the "why," and our front-line staff helped us figure out the "how."

The result of that openness and collaboration is a team that lives a culture of innovation and improvement that has brought them great success and recognition—and brought the community of Fairbanks a level of service that far exceeds what they experienced in September 2015. We had already implemented significant changes to our operations to manage our reduced budget, but 2018 came with even more reductions. Our crews responded by proposing a work schedule that was unheard of for a live-at-home station like Fairbanks.

After much consideration, maintenance staff presented a proposal to management that they work a week-on/week-off rotating schedule. This schedule, they proposed, would improve work and home life for the team, preserve positions and equipment, and improve operations. The crews would work in two 12-hour shifts, seven days a week, to provide 24/7 service to the community without incurring overtime. In addition to this improved level of service and reduced cost, our foremen would be able to perform shift hand-offs face-to-face, making for seamless operations and an ability to follow our published snow removal plan with minimal disruptions. They were well-aware of the challenges such a massive change would entail, but they were determined and optimistic.

Implementing this new schedule could not have been accomplished without 100% support from our operators. Leadership followed through in negotiating a formal Letter of Agreement with the Public

Employees Local 71 union to allow our staff to work this new schedule. With the paperwork in place, we moved forward:

- We divided our personnel into four evenly-sized crews. Two crews work nights, two work days. Each crew has a foreman. The shifts are swapped mid-winter so no operator or foreman is stuck on night shift all winter.
- The workweek is Thursday through Wednesday with 11.5 hours per shift, and a mid-shift 30-minute lunch break. To conform to State of Alaska labor laws, the weeks are split Sunday morning after the first 40 hours are worked. The second 40 hours are considered to be in the following workweek.
- Work hours are 6 a.m. – 6 p.m. for the day shift and 6 p.m. – 6 a.m. for the night shift.
- The crews are paid for their two weeks' work in the seven days that they work. By agreement with our union, this is all paid at a straight-time rate.
- Those two crews go off shift for seven days while the other two crews cover their week off and work the same schedule.
- The night shift receives a 7.5% premium added to their base salary for working a less desirable shift.
- Holidays are treated as a work day if it falls during an employee's scheduled workweek. We add the eight hours of leave to their personal leave bank and pay them time-and-a-half on the holiday worked. If the holiday falls on their week off, they get eight hours of holiday pay added to their paycheck.
- If we do get an extreme winter event, we have the capability to call in people on their scheduled week off. We agreed that the first four days of their scheduled week off would be paid at time-and-a-half. If they continue to work on their week off, the last three days are paid at double time.

All the anticipated benefits of the crews' proposal turned into a reality after the new schedule was implemented in 2018. In addition to more road coverage and an optimized level of service, our operators also felt they had more quality time with their families and they were able to plan more activities during their week off. Our operations also became more efficient when our crews spent more continuous hours during each shift removing snow.

Among all these benefits, the most important results of this innovative idea—straight from the minds of our front-line staff—have been for the residents and visitors of our community. At the turn between 2019 and 2020, Fairbanks saw a relatively major snow event hit us on New Year's Day. We did not throw up our hands and tell the public they wouldn't be able to drive to visit family and friends this year. Thanks to our innovative and dedicated team, our operators were already on shift, ready for whatever Mother Nature decided to throw their way.