

Plenty to be Thankful For!

I hope that all of you have had a wonderful Thanksgiving holiday during this most unusual year. I certainly have, and one of the things I was thankful for was the start to the winter. While we have had two measurable snowfalls here where I am in Eastern Iowa, one in mid-October and the other just last week, neither one left any real snow on the road, because the pavement temperature was too high. The temperatures are of course heading lower, and I have no doubt that we will get snow that needs to be dealt with before too much longer, but so far, so good!

But in addition to the weather, I am also very thankful for the strength of the winter maintenance community, pulling together in this very difficult time. We have had a host of webinars and similar opportunities made available, often at no charge, that have allowed agencies to provide training for their operators without creating too many challenges in the area of social distancing. That is no small thing and has not been happening in every industry or even in every part of public works, so kudos to you all for being so open to sharing like this.

In addition, you have been very willing to share information, methods, approaches, ideas, and concepts to help all of us navigate the challenges of the COVID pandemic. It is fair to say that most everyone was concerned about how to handle things should you lose a significant part of your workforce either due to COVID infection or to quarantine because of exposure to infected individuals. That is a very legitimate concern, and earlier this year I worked on just this issue with Mark DeVries to find out what agencies were planning on doing (and also to determine how much agencies had been impacted by all of this). Everyone was very open to sharing ideas, and there were a host of them.

Most of the ideas revolved around limiting the number of folk that your operators came into contact with at work. That way, if someone did get infected, you might lose a few of your operators, but you would hopefully not lose 50% of them. The methods ranged from having operators go straight to their trucks when they arrived at work, and getting briefed over the radio, to creating small work teams that could be briefed in person (but socially distanced) so as to limit any potential viral spread. Lots of people held briefings in open spaces or outside, to further limit possible viral spread.

None of these changes were easy, and often you found that you had figured out solutions and implemented them long before your HR departments had even figured out there was an issue that needed addressing – talk about a can do attitude! And behind all of these steps that you have taken is a strong and abiding commitment to serve the people in your community, by making sure they have safe and sustainable transportation in the wintertime. Thank you all for that commitment!

Talking of sustainability, we now have our self-assessment tool available for you to use on-line. While we are not doing awards in 2020, we will be announcing the awards process and timing for 2021 in January, so please keep an eye open for that. And I am personally thankful that we got the tool available on-line. As I am sure you can imagine, there were a number of unexpected challenges on the way to making that possible! (To access the tool, log into your account, get to the home page and scroll down until you get to the Awards panel, which talks about the tool. At the end of that panel is a link which says “access the self assessment tool” – click on that and you are good to go!).

So, yes, this has been a very strange year, but there is still plenty of things for which I am very thankful. But, of all of them, I am most thankful for you all – the community of practitioners of winter maintenance. You are a wonderful group of hard working, dedicated and committed people, and by your work and your commitment you make the world a better and a safer place – thank you all for that!