Buffalo Commons Student Perspectives

Unburying Buffalo, Revisited: Making Sidewalk Snow Removal a Municipal Responsibility

Brooklynn Flowers

November 9, 2026

About the Series
The Buffalo Commons Student Perspectives Series gives students an opportunity to share original research and analysis on issues of importance to Partnership for the Public Good and its partners. This paper was prepared in Fall 2026 for the **Lawyers as Change Agents course at the University at Buffalo School of Law**. Thank you to Professor Sam Magavern for facilitating this student research.

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Executive Summary

Buffalo clears streets after major snowstorms but still depends on individual property owners and occupants to clear most sidewalks. This parcel-by-parcel system produces inconsistent results. One uncleared section can block routes to work, school, grocery stores, medical appointments, or public transportation. The burden falls most heavily on residents who do not drive, older adults, people with disabilities, and lower-income residents who cannot afford snowblowers or private contractors.

Programs in other northern cities show several ways municipalities can approach sidewalk clearing. Syracuse provides the closest model because it clears a limited network of heavily used pedestrian routes while leaving some responsibility with property owners.

Buffalo should create a similar pilot program, prioritizing sidewalks near bus stops, schools, commercial districts, and other high-use destinations. Properly equipped City employees or contractors could clear these connected routes more quickly, consistently, and efficiently than thousands of property owners working separately. Buffalo should also support and coordinate volunteer programs that assist residents who cannot clear their own sidewalks. Together, municipal clearing and organized volunteer efforts would provide safer and more dependable winter access without requiring immediate citywide service.

Buffalo's Sidewalk Snow Problem

RESPONSIBILITY FALLS ON PROPERTY OWNERS

Buffalo, New York, is notorious for heavy snow. From the Blizzard of 1977[1] to Snowvember[2], major storms have repeatedly disrupted life across the city. While part of the city's charm, mass snow accumulation can be unsafe to residents and serve as a barrier to necessary resources. Buffalo has built a public system for clearing streets after winter storms, but it still relies on thousands of individual owners and occupants to clear most of the city's sidewalks. Buffalo Code Section 413-50 requires them to remove snow and ice from adjoining sidewalks before 9:00 a.m.[3] An unpaved sidewalk must have a cleared path at least three feet wide.[4] The City mainly relies on complaints, inspections, warnings and penalties when a sidewalk remains blocked by snow. Its public data records quality-of-life summonses for snow and ice violations.[5] This system may punish violations, but it does not guarantee prompt sidewalk snow removal. A resident can report a blocked sidewalk and still wait while the City investigates, contacts the property owner, and begins enforcement, but during that delay, the route remains unusable for Buffalo residents.



Figure 1. Snow covers Laurel Street and its sidewalks during the December 2022 Buffalo blizzard. Photo by Andre Carrotflower, December 24, 2022. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.[6]

THE CURRENT SYSTEM PRODUCES INCONSISTENT ROUTES

The 2023 report *Unburying Buffalo* explained why parcel-by-parcel responsibility does not produce a dependable pedestrian system. One section of buried sidewalk can prevent residents from safely reaching jobs, grocery stores, schools, medical appointments, and public transportation.[7]

Unsurprisingly, recent evidence shows that the problem continued after the 2023 report. Buffalo Toronto Public Media reviewed five winters of Buffalo data and found about 2,200 snow-removal inspection complaints and 669 publicly reported violations.[8] Only around 5% of snow-related complaints resulted in a violation being issued by city inspectors for the same property address.[9] Regardless of enforcement, the problem remains: fines are issued, but the sidewalks may remain blocked and unusable.

THE BURDEN FALLS UNEQUALLY

Blocked sidewalks create serious barriers for residents who depend on walking and public transportation. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2020-2024 American Community Survey, 22.6% of Buffalo households have no vehicle available.[10] Many workers rely on buses to reach employment across Erie County.[11] For those households, a single uncleared stretch of sidewalk can mean missing work and losing much-needed wages.

The current policy also requires residents to perform demanding physical work, even when age or disability makes that work difficult, unsafe, or even impossible. Snow shoveling can cause lower-back and other soft-tissue injuries, and the physical exertion can trigger serious cardiac events. A national study estimated about 11,500 snow-shoveling injuries and medical emergencies treated in U.S. emergency departments each year.[12] Snow and ice increase the risk

of falls among older adults, and resulting injuries can cause fractures, hospitalization, loss of independence, and in the most extreme cases, death.[13] They also create serious barriers for people who use wheelchairs, walkers, canes, or other mobility devices.[14] Disability Rights New York warns that snow can block sidewalks, curb ramps, and access to public transportation.[15] Requiring each resident to solve the sidewalk snow problem alone therefore creates unequal access to public spaces.

Residents do not have the same resources available to keep their sidewalks clear. A property owner who can afford a snowblower or private contractor may have little difficulty meeting the city's requirements. A lower-income resident may have only a shovel and may not be able to pay someone to help. As a result, the condition of a sidewalk often depends on the income and resources of the adjoining property owner. This creates another inequality within the current system.

Developments in Buffalo Since the 2023 Report

BUFFALO HAS CONTINUED TO DEBATE MUNICIPAL RESPONSIBILITY

Public pressure for a municipal role in sidewalk snow removal continued after the 2023 report. Residents and pedestrian advocates urged the City of Buffalo to adopt a set plan rather than depend on inconsistent compliance by residents.[16] The debate focuses on whether the City of Buffalo should clear heavily used sidewalks just as it clears city streets. Advocates renewed that demand before the 2026 winter season starts and called for citywide planning.[17]

In March 2024, Buffalo's Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Board proposed a specific starting point. It recommended a $750,000 pilot program to clear at least 100 miles of high-use sidewalks.[18] The proposal called for a data-driven network focused on places with strong pedestrian activity.[19] To date, the City of Buffalo has not implemented this proposal or any other sidewalk snow-removal pilot program.

BUFFALO'S POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT HAS CHANGED

Buffalo's political environment changed after the 2023 report. Mayor Sean Ryan made better snow removal in the City of Buffalo a major issue during his 2025 campaign. After taking office in January 2026, his administration received favorable reviews for its first significant street-plowing response.[20] Mayor Ryan's proposed 2026-2027 budget also sought additional plows, drivers, and mechanics for the Department of Public Works.[21] While those investments focus primarily on street snow removal, they indicate a step in the right direction which could lead to a sidewalk snow-removal pilot program.

Brief Survey of Municipal Sidewalk Programs in New York State

ALBANY

Albany continues to place the primary duty on property owners. Volunteer groups sometimes organize sidewalk brigades to help neighbors who cannot shovel.[22] This approach provides valuable assistance, but volunteers cannot guarantee a continuous route after every snowstorm.

BINGHAMTON

Binghamton also requires property owners to clear adjoining sidewalks. If an owner fails to comply, the city may send public works crews to remove the snow and charge the cost to the property owner.[23] This gives the city a direct way to correct a violation, although the response begins only after the sidewalk has already been blocked.

ITHACA

Ithaca uses a similar clear-and-bill system. If a sidewalk remains uncleared twenty-four hours after a snow event begins, a municipal sidewalk crew may clear it. The city charges the owner at least $50 for that work.[24] The system combines private responsibility with a municipal backstop if needed.

JAMESTOWN

Jamestown takes a more targeted approach. Its Department of Public Works plows sidewalks along selected high-traffic routes.[25] This limited network recognizes that some sidewalks serve a broader public purpose and deserve planned municipal service from the city.

SCHENECTADY

Schenectady similarly places the legal duty to clear sidewalks on property owners. If an owner fails to act, the city may arrange for removal and charge the owner for the work.[26]

UTICA

Utica also requires property owners to remove snow and ice from adjoining sidewalks. When an owner fails to comply, the city may clear the sidewalk and charge the owner for the cost.[27]

NEW YORK CITY

New York City requires property owners to clear a path at least four feet wide. Residents who are over sixty or have disabilities may contact 311 to ask about volunteer snow-removal assistance.[28] The program recognizes that some city residents cannot perform the work, but it still depends heavily on owners and volunteers.

LEVELS OF MUNICIPAL INVOLVEMENT

Together, these New York programs generally show three levels of municipal involvement. Albany and New York City mainly rely on owners and volunteer assistance. Binghamton, Ithaca, Schenectady, and Utica use municipal crews as a backstop and recover the costs from the property owners. Jamestown goes further by planning service along selected high-traffic routes. Buffalo could use any of these tools, but only the Jamestown approach begins with the goal of keeping high-usage pedestrian walkways clear and free from snow.

Updates to the Municipal Programs Profiled in the 2023 Report

SYRACUSE

Syracuse provides the closest model for a successful sidewalk snow removal program in the City of Buffalo. Syracuse has expanded its supplemental sidewalk program to approximately 145 miles

of well-used pedestrian routes.[29] Municipal service begins after about three inches of snow and helps keep major pedestrian routes open, although property owners remain responsible for clearing their sidewalks.

Syracuse used a data-driven framework to choose its routes for its sidewalk snow removal program.[30] The City of Syracuse and the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council considered pedestrian activity, traffic levels, schools, stores, and other important destinations.[31] Buffalo could use the same methods and framework with local transit, demographic, common complaints, and pedestrian data.



Figure 2. Syracuse's supplemental sidewalk snow-removal network. Source: City of Syracuse, "Sidewalks in Winter," accessed October 15, 2026, https://www.syr.gov/Living/Winter/Sidewalks.

Financially, sidewalk snow removal is not as predictable as a City Council member might like. During the 2024-2025 season, Syracuse exhausted its original sidewalk snow removal allocation and approved more funding.[32] Contractors had already deployed sixteen times by early February.[33] Buffalo is no stranger to unpredictable winter weather and should therefore prepare for winters that require more sidewalk snow-removal funding than others, perhaps maintaining a reserve for those funds.

ROCHESTER

Rochester operates a much larger contractor-based program. Rochester provides supplemental clearing on approximately 878 miles of sidewalks after four inches of new snow. Private contractors perform the work, while owners remain responsible for residual snow, ice, driveways, and other areas the equipment cannot fully clear. Rochester finances the service through a frontage-based charge placed on property tax bills.[34] Although Rochester's program is much more extensive, it may not be the best model for Buffalo. Adopting the same funding structure would increase annual costs for Buffalo property owners and could make the program more difficult to gain public support for. Still, Rochester shows that a city with many of Buffalo's challenges can operate a large sidewalk program. Before rejecting a similar funding



Figure 3. A tractor equipped with a snowplow clears a residential walkway after heavy snowfall. Rochester uses similar equipment to provide supplemental sidewalk clearing throughout the city.

Source: David Riley, "Sidewalk Snow Removal: How Are We Doing in Monroe County?," Reconnect Rochester, March 27, 2018, https://reconnectrochester.org/2018/03/sidewalk-snow-removal-monroe-county/

model, Buffalo should explain the full costs and benefits to residents and build support for the level of service they want.

OTTAWA

Ottawa continues to take a tiered approach to municipal sidewalk snow removal.[35] Downtown sidewalks receive service after 2.5 centimeters of snow, with a goal of clearing them within four hours after the snowfall ends. Residential sidewalks are generally cleared after five centimeters of snow, with a longer target of approximately twelve to sixteen hours.

BURLINGTON

Burlington provides broad municipal sidewalk snow removal service and reports maintaining approximately 150 miles of sidewalks during winter.[36] Its experience shows that a northern city, like Buffalo, can treat sidewalk snow removal as a regular function of the Department of Public Works.

USING THESE MODELS AS A BASELINE FOR BUFFALO

The four programs profiled in the 2023 report now provide Buffalo with a useful range of choices. Syracuse offers a targeted network at a scale close to Buffalo's proposed pilot, using data to choose high-usage pedestrian routes. Rochester shows how contractors can operate a much larger system while owners retain duties. Ottawa demonstrates how to publish different triggers and deadlines for different route types. Burlington shows the value of treating sidewalk work as a normal municipal service. The City of Buffalo would most likely benefit the most from combining different aspects of different cities' sidewalk snow removal programs.

Additional Municipal Methods for Sidewalk Snow Removal Outside of New York State

The cities discussed above are not the only places where local city governments have taken on some responsibility for sidewalk snow removal. Duluth, Traverse City, and Ann Arbor have each adopted more limited programs that focus on sidewalks used most often by pedestrians.

DULUTH

Duluth uses a targeted priority-route model. The city publishes maps showing the sidewalks it clears after snow events.[37] Property owners must still clear adjoining sidewalks within twenty-four hours.[38]

TRAVERSE CITY

Traverse City provides supplemental sidewalk plowing on selected routes. It prioritizes areas near schools, city buildings, and high-traffic pedestrian routes.[39]

ANN ARBOR

Ann Arbor contracts for snow removal on designated city-maintained sidewalks and pedestrian crossings. Its contract covers service after more than one inch of snow or freezing rain and uses an eight-hour completion target.[40]

Recommendation for Buffalo

A LIMITED SYRACUSE-STYLE PROGRAM

The City of Buffalo should create a limited program modeled primarily on Syracuse. In 2024, Buffalo's Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Board proposed a $750,000 pilot that would clear at least 100 miles of heavily used sidewalks. Syracuse now clears approximately 145 miles of sidewalks after about three inches of snow.[41] A program of similar size would allow Buffalo to keep important routes open without immediately taking on the cost of citywide clearing.

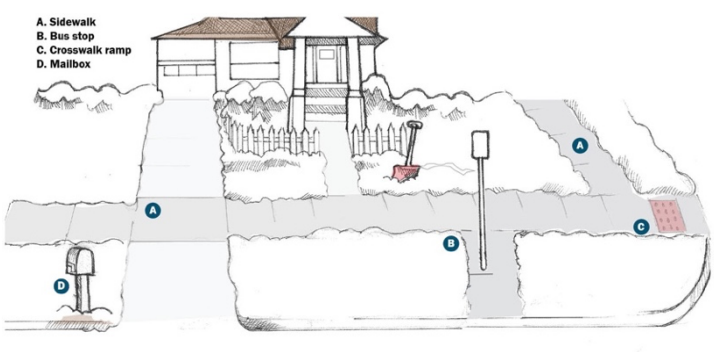


Figure 4. Ann Arbor identifies sidewalks, concrete bus-stop walks, and crosswalk ramps as areas that property owners or occupants must clear after snowfall. Source: City of Ann Arbor, "Sidewalk Snow and Ice Removal," accessed October 22, 2026, https://www.a2gov.org/police-department/divisions/sidewalk-snow-and-ice-removal/.

HIGH-USE ROUTES

Buffalo should focus on sidewalks leading to bus stops, schools, commercial areas, and other busy destinations. Syracuse considered pedestrian activity, schools, stores, and neighborhood destinations when selecting its routes.[42] Jamestown and Traverse City also prioritize high-traffic sidewalks, schools, public buildings, and main roads.[43] Buffalo should follow these examples and create connected routes to important destinations rather than clear scattered sections throughout the city.



Figure 5. A proposed Buffalo sidewalk snow-removal pilot would begin with 60 miles of high-use transit corridors and routes serving 80 schools.

Source: Partnership for the Public Good, Citizens for Regional Transit, Buffalo Transit Riders United, and GObike Buffalo, "Sidewalk Snow Removal Pilot Proposal," 2024, reproduced in GObike Buffalo, "Sixteen Years of Asking," accessed October 22, 2026, https://gobikebuffalo.org/16th-year-of-bicycle-pedestrian-board-pleading-with-common-council-to-take-on-sidewalk-snow-removal/.

A MORE EFFICIENT SYSTEM

A limited municipal program would also clear snow more efficiently. Instead of depending on thousands of residents and small businesses using different equipment and working at different times, Buffalo could send a smaller number of properly equipped crews along connected routes. Those crews could include City employees, contractors, or organized volunteers. Individual property owners would still have responsibilities, but the City would no longer depend entirely on whether each owner has the time, money, physical ability, or equipment needed to clear the sidewalk.

This approach could lower costs outside the snow-removal budget. Faster and more consistent clearing can reduce missed work, lost shopping trips, falls, and other injuries. A pilot would

increase direct City spending, but a smaller number of properly equipped crews could use fewer total person-hours and reduce costs that otherwise fall on residents, employers, local businesses, health systems, and public-assistance programs.

VOLUNTEER SUPPORT

Buffalo should support Parkside's Snow Angels[44], Buffalo Snow Brigade[45], and Allentown's sidewalk-clearing pilot.[46] City government could publicize them, coordinate requests, and fund equipment so volunteers can adopt routes or assist older adults and people with disabilities. Often dubbed "The City of Good Neighbors," Buffalo should capitalize on its strong community spirit by helping volunteers reach residents who cannot clear their own sidewalks.

CONTINUED PROPERTY-OWNER RESPONSIBILITY

It would be unrealistic to ask the City of Buffalo to completely remove the responsibility of property owners. Syracuse provides supplemental clearing, but owners remain responsible for their sidewalks.[47] Duluth similarly clears a mapped network while requiring owners to clear adjoining sidewalks within twenty-four hours.[48] Buffalo could follow the same approach. The city would clear selected high-use routes, while owners would remain responsible for snow and ice left behind and for sidewalks outside the program.

FUNDING, STAFFING, AND SERVICE STANDARDS

Syracuse should provide the main model, but other cities can help Buffalo decide how the program should operate. Rochester and Ann Arbor use private contractors to clear designated sidewalks and crossings.[49] Buffalo could also use contractors rather than immediately purchasing equipment and hiring enough employees to operate the program. Contracts should identify the routes, the amount of snowfall that triggers service, and the time allowed to complete the work.

Rochester's funding system may not be the best fit for Buffalo because its frontage-based charge increases the amount property owners pay on their tax bills. Buffalo should instead fund the pilot through the annual city budget. The city should still be prepared for costs to change from year to year, as evidenced by Syracuse exhausting its original allocation during the 2024-2025 season and needing additional funding. Starting with a limited program would allow Buffalo to measure those costs before adding more routes.

Conclusion

Snowfall is part of Buffalo's charm and identity as a city, but that charm fades quickly when sidewalks become impassable and residents cannot safely reach work, school, grocery stores, public transportation, and other places necessary for everyday life. Buffalo has adapted over the years to respond to heavy lake-effect snow, and it should continue to adapt by creating a pilot sidewalk snow-removal program. Such a program would benefit all residents while providing greater equity for older adults and people with disabilities, who face the greatest barriers under the current system.

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