

PERSPECTIVE

The Boston Globe

## Take This Job and Shovel It

### WE LOVE TO SAY WE'RE AMERICA'S WALKING CITY. BUT COME WINTERTIME, WE'RE ANYTHING BUT.

By BETH TEITELL | January 21, 2007

Bostonians are quick to take the high road – in most cases. We banish smokers and cellphone yakkers to back alleys. We work to reduce our carbon footprints, shop organically, and shun blood diamonds. We even pick up dog poop. And, yet, when it comes to shoveling snow from our sidewalks – to thinking and acting locally about a problem under our very feet – we have a blind spot.

It may not seem fair that you have to pick up after Mother Nature, but it's not about you. It's about the old woman with the cane, the wheelchair user who can't get to the kneeling bus because the sidewalk is a luge run, the mother with a side-by-side stroller, the commuter who now finds himself in need of crampons, and the children on their way to school.

So, who's at fault? As easy as it would be to accuse municipal officials, there's plenty of blame to go around. But let's begin with government. Within city limits, a homeowner who doesn't shovel within the allowed time (technically three hours after a storm ends, but usually a day) gets slapped with a \$15 fine. Sounds reasonable, until you compare it with the \$25 fine for littering. Throwing a CharlieTicket on the ground is considered worse than sending Grandma to the hospital with a broken hip?

So, for starters, let's raise the fines – and while we're at it, let's empower parking officers to write snow-shoveling tickets (now the sole province of the city's Inspectional Services Department).

But, alas, even a highly trained unit of crack snow agents wouldn't be able to do the job, no matter how many people call the city's snitch line to rat out neighbors. Enforcement's not as straightforward as you'd think. While some scofflaws can be snagged on their La-Z-Boys as they enjoy the storm on TV, others may be a continent away. The absentee landlord in sunny LA had no idea that it snowed in Boston, dude. Neither did the bank officer in charge of the foreclosed property with the impassable path. Even if it takes the ISD just a single day to figure out which person to contact, that's a day without a walk for the folks back home. As for the public agencies and local governments that don't shovel the sidewalks they're responsible for (on bridges or abutting parks or public properties), what's their excuse? They, of all entities, should know better.

So, how can we persuade our neighbors – and, gulp, ourselves – to head out with a shovel in the morning cold, or to come home after a long day's work and go right back out again, the wind and the kids howling, dinner unmade?

Shame, that's how. Make it more embarrassing to leave your walk icy than to drive a Hummer during a gas crunch or answer a cellphone at the movies. Or, as one self-described "transportation nerd" tells me: "We've got to make shoveling the social norm." That's Wendy Landman speaking, the executive director of WalkBoston, a pedestrian advocacy organization. "Somehow," she says, "it hasn't penetrated people's consciousness."

Make snow removal the norm? WalkBoston wants to team up with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health for a "social marketing" campaign, which would attack the issue along health, safety, social isolation, and common courtesy lines. If all goes well, shirking shoveling will be the new smoking.

This being America, a celebrity endorsement wouldn't hurt. Imagine the glamour shoveling could achieve if Angelina Jolie or Madonna took it up between adoptions. Speaking of which, wouldn't it be wonderful if local companies "adopted" a section of sidewalk, the way they do stretches of highway? Civic-minded or PR-hungry health clubs could hold ShovelMaster boot camps (bonus: Members would actually accomplish something with all that physical exertion). And although many people already help their disabled or elderly neighbors by shoveling for them, why not expand those efforts with neighborhood "snow watch" programs? Treat snow like the criminal element it is!

If Boston wants to keep calling itself "America's Walking City," it's got to earn the moniker 12 months a year. Not just when it's sunny and 70.

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