

Winter is costing Hastings Highlands

By Sarah Sobanski

The municipality's roads department has already spent around \$69,000 more in the first half of its winter season than it did in 2015. That's on salt alone from October to December in 2016. It's also depleted half of its sand stockpiles where the same time frame in 2015 only used around a third.

The roads department's winter season runs from fall to spring.

"Your winters go in between two years, so we call it a season," said Operations manager Adrian Tomasini. "We spent all of our budget [but] we didn't go over budget this year. That would be the winter from January to December for 2016."

In the early 2015-'16 season there were four winter events - any sort of precipitation from freezing rain to rain to snow. The first winter event of the 2016-'17 season was Oct. 28. There were 12 by the end of 2016. Comparatively, that's three times the events from one year to the next between October and December.

"Now, you're looking at two years that were day and night kind of a thing," said Tomasini, explaining last season there wasn't a lot of winter activity. This year, winter seemed to start in October where usually it starts in the last week of November. "You had two kind of oddball years, one really bad and one really not. Both of them weren't normal on both ends of the scale."

Every year, the roads department estimates its expenses based on how much it spent during the two previous winters. Based on that system, Tomasini estimated the beginning of this winter season should have cost around \$40,000 more in salt than in 2015 as it was a mild season. Instead it was almost \$30,000 more.

That means the first part of this winter was well over budget.

Luckily, the winter season runs over two budget years so there is some give to estimate a higher cost for 2017-'18 to afford this season's heavy winter.

"That was my joke in council is that I'm OK now because we're in 2017. We can forecast that we're going to be using a little bit more for 2017 than we normally would have," said Tomasini.

This year, the municipality also took on producing its own sand for its winter operations. Tomasini estimated Hastings Highlands has about 6,000 tonnes of stockpiled sand in one of its aggregate pits. Salt is ordered on demand.

Still, the winter just keeps hammering the area. Tomasini told *Bancroft This Week* on Jan. 23 the municipality has already seen eight winter events in January. He was expecting another event that night.

Tomasini suggested the roads department hadn't really had a break. As of Jan. 23, workers had been out almost every weekend including the holidays.

"It takes a toll on them and they have to be in earlier than the storm starts. [Then], they have to be in later to get the people home after work and the kids to school or away from school. It wears on them a bit," said Tomasini. "We're not known as the first responders but sometimes we are the first guys out on the roads to help the police and the ambulances out. That's what we do."

The best kind of winter, according to the roads department, is a cold and dry one. Whether it's rain, freezing rain or snow, the trucks hit the roads. They're also out to sand gravel roads in mild weather. The sun melts the snow packed roads and makes them slippery when it gets colder at night. It's the same for rain.

"You have to go down hills with 20 tonnes of sand. Gravity of course takes over. It's been a very difficult winter because of that. The optimum winter that makes it easy for us is something that's very cold because you have the traction and you don't lose your sand on the roads. A colder winter is preferable for winter operations," said Tomasini.