

That was some letter Ms. Larsen.

I have to say, I read your letter to the editor with mixed emotions. At first, your use of words such as “disappointed, disrespectful, ridiculous” and expectations of a formal apology not only caused me surprise but also distress. Your passion and dedication to the Union you represent is clearly visible from your correspondence. For that you have my respect. It is this same passion that gives me the conviction to give you the following candid reply. Ms. Larsen, please do not presume to know how I feel about the staff at the City of Surrey. At city hall, we share a common goals and a level of civility and genuine respect for all. I not only recognize the staff for their very commendable efforts in the snow removal these past few weeks, I, more importantly, respect their contributions and sacrifices during the holiday season. I have a significant amount of admiration for our staff who came out in full force over their holidays to work through this storm while I, as you so undignifiably put it, “sat at home”. From the highest echelon of management right down to the newest recruit, our staff is second to none.

In fact, I’m proud to state that Surrey is one of the most cost effective and efficient municipalities in Canada. That wouldn’t be possible without the staff that we have. In saying that, if any apologies are due Ms. Larsen, they are not to you, but rather to the residents of Surrey. Forgive me for carrying the conviction to speak on behalf of all our seniors, sick, elderly, persons with disabilities, young school aged children and let us not forget the average working man and woman who lost pay as a result of not being able to navigate through the snow to get to work.

However, staff can only do so much with the available resources. As you mentioned, snow removal crews were working 12 hour shifts and then some, which is significant particularly when considering that our city fleet (equipment) is not large enough to tackle the type of snowstorm we witnessed over Christmas. Let me be very clear, the issue I raised speaks to augmenting snow clearing in an emergency snowstorm situation. The issue is not about overtime or contracting out city jobs. It is about providing a high quality service in a time sensitive manner at a justifiable cost while keeping our residents safe. The past few years have shown that climates are changing and snowfalls are becoming progressively heavier in our city. The overwhelming number of phone calls, emails and messages I received over the past 3 weeks sent a very strong message to me. We as elected persons, need to seek more viable solutions in case of such emergencies. Ms. Larsen, you are employed by the union, but as a fellow elected official, you also represent Mrs. S. who's husband requires a blood transfusion 2 times per week and couldn't travel to VGH because he couldn't get out of his street, and Mr. K. who 's father could not get to the hospital for his kidney dialysis treatment, and let's not forget Ms. P who was a prisoner in her cul-de-sac and was therefore unable to go to the store to get baby formula.

Snow removal services are not a privilege or a demand. They're not even an option. They're a necessity. I have never suggested or implied that our staff was negligent, insufficient or weren't working hard enough. The change needed is not in our staff but in our policy and it's our responsibility as governance to set that policy. When I said “it wasn't done fast enough”, this was not a reflection on our staff, but rather our policy. My objective continues to be to improve established policy and in this particular instance, increase the quality of our snow clearing service. How do we do this? Should we be looking at hiring more auxiliary staff for emergency situations? How about augmenting services through idle contractors who have available equipment utilizing the same landscape and paving companies that the city contracts for work during the summer. Maybe we should be reviewing our by-laws in terms of snow clearing of sidewalks and the requirements of residents. Perhaps we need to review best practices utilized by other major Canadian cities and form some partnerships with the private sector to avoid committing ourselves to significant capital investments and other unnecessary cash outlays for both manpower and equipment. While the manner in which you've described my comments

has not accurately reflected my position, I am committed to moving forward to seek practical solutions. So thank you for sharing your criticisms , now how about some solutions?

Tom Gill, CMA
Councillor, City of Surrey