



MEDIA RELEASE

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RE: Street sweeper a sure sign of spring

AMHERST, Nova Scotia – What do robins, ducks flying north and a street sweeper have in common?

They're sure signs spring is here.

Amherst's street sweeper came out of its winter hibernation in the Angus building after the snow from the last storm in mid-April melted. At its helm is Darrel Gautreau, whose been employed with the town since 1976.

"When I joined the town, we were still sweeping the streets by hand, and I once drove a street sweeper the town owned that had just three wheels," he says.

The current street sweeper has four wheels, two steering columns, two gas pedals and two brake pedals that are separated by a console containing several switches, which control everything from the emergency lights on the vehicle to the vacuums to the brushes to the water jets that help keep the dust down.

Today, Gautreau is in the right-hand seat. He's already spent a bit of time sweeping one side of South Albion Street, when he directs the machine towards Willow Street. At the corner of Spring and Willow, he hits the buttons that control the brushes, the vacuum and the water jets. The cab is immediately filled by a deep hum as the machine begins sucking up debris.



Town employee Darrel Gautreau guides a street sweeper up Willow Street. (Tom McCoag / Town of Amherst)



“We do every street in town that has a curb,” he explains, his eyes darting about as he takes in where we’re going, where we’ve been and how well the vacuums are working while travelling at less than five kilometres per hour.

Gautreau is on the constant lookout for large chunks of asphalt and concrete as well as tree branches, which the machine cannot sweep up. He avoids them by simply driving around them.

Pointing to a large pile of dirt that he has avoided, he explains that he reports such things to others, who will come and clean it up with other town machines.

“I’ve noticed there aren’t as many tree branches down this year compared to other years, which is a good thing because they get stuck in the vacuum,” Gautreau said. “You have to turn the machine off, climb out and use an iron rod we have to get rid of the clog the branches cause.”

Cleaning the streets not only makes the town prettier, it makes the roads safer by removing the dirt, gravel and asphalt that could cause issues for cyclists. Sweeping the streets also keeps the dirt, gravel and asphalt out of the storm sewer system and eventually the Bay of Fundy.

It takes about three weeks at this time of the year to cover the 40 kilometres of town streets that do have curbs.

“You have to remember that we do each side of the street, so that number is doubled,” he said, noting that it has taken us about 30 minutes to travel between Spring Street and Townshend Avenue.

At this time of year, it often takes more than one pass to collect all of the sand deposited on the streets over the winter and the small pieces of asphalt created by the formation of potholes.

Most of his days begin at 8 a.m., but about twice a week he starts at 6 a.m. in order to sweep the downtown clear of debris when there isn’t much traffic on Victoria Street.



The Town of Amherst's street sweeper cleans up Willow Street. The pics show before and after shots. (Tom McCoag / Town of Amherst)



Prior to hitting the streets, Gautreau ensures the machine is fueled and the water tank is full. He also ensures the brushes and water jets are working properly.

Pointing to the brushes, a large one that sits under the machine and guides dirt to the vacuums and a smaller one that brushes up against the curb, much like the one on a Zamboni brushes up against the boards of a hockey rink, he says these get replaced about three times each year.

Most of the dirt we're picking up on Willow Street is loose gravel and small bits of asphalt. When we hit South Albion Street, heading from Robert Angus Drive towards the firehall, hundreds of cigarette butts and several coffee cups are also being sucked up.

"It's unbelievable how many cigarette butts we sweep up," he says.

At this time of the year, it's not hard keeping the dust down because the dirt is damp, but other times of the year, when things dry out, "keeping the dust down is the big thing," Gautreau added.

As we sweep, cars are passing us, some cautiously, some as if we're not even on the road. Gautreau takes it all in stride. It's the same when he comes along a parked car, which he just drives around.

"I'll just have to come back later to get that dirt," he said.

The job can be frustrating.

"You can clean a street, then the wind comes up and when you drive the same street the next day, it's like it was never swept," he said, adding that is especially true in the fall when leaves are constantly falling.

What is more frustrating, he adds, is watching someone drop a coffee cup or a plastic pop bottle onto the street just after he's swept it.

"I wish that didn't happen, but it does," he says, shaking his head.

Just then, he notices the machine isn't picking up dirt like it was a just a few minutes before.

"It's clogged," he said. "So instead of getting out here where all this traffic is, I'm going to take it back to the shop and dump the load."

It takes only a few minutes to get to the shop, behind which he dumps about a tonne of earth, mixed with cigarette butts and coffee cups.

With the load dumped and the machine unclogged, he heads back out to South Albion Street to continue sweeping the streets, something he will continue to do from now until the next freeze up, when the sweeper will once again be put into hibernation for the winter.



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