

SNOW PROBLEM

by RICHARD LOVEGROVE
photos by LOGAN WALLACE

The warmth of springtime may be upon us, but in the winter we can't wait on temperatures to melt ice and snow on Virginia Tech's 22 miles of sidewalks and 34 lane miles of roads and service drives. When frigid weather whips into Blacksburg, more than 300 people—from tractor drivers to shovel wielders—fight to keep dining centers open and classes in session. Here's how it happens, according to Anthony Watson, associate director of facilities, buildings, and grounds.

1 As the potential for a storm increases, **John Beach**, chief of staff for facilities operations, starts watching forecast models and talking to the National Weather Service.

2 When snow or a freezing mix is coming, crews pretreat the streets and parking lots (as well as sidewalks and stairs, if there's time) with **23 percent salt brine** taken straight from the tanks at the Power Plant. The process is a vast improvement over the past when the brine was mixed by hand.





All hands on deck: Virginia Tech workers (from left to right) Randy Blankenship, Bobby Owen, Trent Chinault, Henry Price, and John Terry clear a path near Burruss Hall, while Windell Jones operates the motor grader at lower left.

3 If more than **4 inches** is forecast, administrators post a notice for owners to remove their vehicles from emergency snow routes, which allows plowers to push snow over the curb and into the grass.

4 By **5 a.m.** the morning of a storm, Sherwood Wilson, vice president for administration, is collecting road-condition and readiness reports to decide along with other administrators whether the university opens, starts late, or stays closed. These days, the decision depends heavily on whether **Blacksburg Transit** can operate. "If BT can't run, we don't open," said Watson.



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5 Once the snow (or ice) starts, **eight grounds workers** plow roads, loading docks, and service drives in **12-hour shifts**. Operators of more than a dozen tractors, utility task vehicles, and skid steers help clear main sidewalks. More than **200 trade shop workers and housekeepers** break out the shovels, and student resident advisors even pitch in. "We can touch just about everything on campus in two hours," Watson said. "It's really a group effort."

6 Once the storm is over, workers "**hit everything hard**," Watson said, widening paths through the snow on sidewalks and roads. Contract crews clear parking lots (Tech workers try to keep parking lot drive lanes plowed during the storm). Assigned people report early, sometimes for days after a storm, to treat any melt that has refrozen. □

Brrr:

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DEEPEST

24-hour Blacksburg snowfalls (in inches)

(National Weather Service)

20.0

Jan. 10, 1921

15.4

Feb. 13, 1960

14.1

Mar. 13, 1993

14.0

Jan. 7, 1996

14.0

Dec. 26, 1969

14.0

Dec. 17, 1930

Sat. 13.6

Jan. 22, 1966

12.4

Mar. 2, 1960

12.0

Dec. 18, 2009

12.0

Jan. 29, 1966

SAT.