

Employees honored for emergency work

By Joanne Maliszewski
Staff writer

One employee on a sun-and-fun vacation heard news reports about heavy snows lashing Oakland County. He cut short his vacation, returned to work and joined his colleagues burning the midnight oil on big, yellow snow plows.

"When everyone else is running for cover, they are coming out of their homes, out of their sleep," Farmington Hills Department of Public Works superintendent Dan Rooney said about his 30 employees.

"We're looking for some recognition for a staff of hardworking men and women who are called on in emergencies," Rooney said.

DPW workers are required to respond to at least 50 percent of the emergency calls, which include wash cars, trees down and snow storms. But by far, most employees rack up 80-90 percent response for emergencies, Rooney said.

DPW employees were recognized Monday by Farmington Hills City Council and Mayor Jody Soronen, who proclaimed May 15-21 National Public Works Week.

"... the efficiency of the qualified and dedicated personnel who staff public works departments is inextricably influenced by the people's attitude and understanding of the importance of the work they perform," according to the proclamation.

Rooney's staff are those you see in the big, school-bus-yellow trucks, Gradalls and plow trucks — often at hours when others are tucked away at home from the heat and cold.

THIS WEEK, DPW workers were leveling shoulders along Drake Road, where berms were beginning to form, preventing road runoff water from entering nearby drainage ditches.

Aboard a large Gradall, employee Dave Edwards was using an attached mechanized bucket to scrape and level the dirt shoulders.

"You get used to the noise. I don't even hear it anymore," Edwards said, as he turned off the engine.

As complicated as the machinery appears, Edwards said it's simple. The Gradall can be worked from either end. One end does the work, the other end is where he sits to drive the machinery back to DPW headquarters on Halsted, Edwards said.

The size of the equipment and vehicles used by the DPW almost dwarfs the average-sized person. To be sure, employee Wayne Smith said driving a 10-yard dump truck is a whole new way of driving.

"It teaches you to drive much more defensively than in a car. You have to watch the other driver much more," Smith said.

The more than 10-year-old DPW is responsible for two major tasks: street and city-owned-vehicle maintenance. Under DPW employees' watchful eyes, the city's 280 miles of roads are maintained. That includes pavement and shoulder repair, cleaning drainage ditches, street cleaning, street signs and cleaning out storm sewers.

THE CITY'S 280 vehicles, ranging from a sit-down lawn mower to police cars, city staff cars, big \$150,000 pieces of road maintenance equipment and fire ladder trucks, also are under the DPW's care.

DPW staff communicate with each other, Rooney and headquarters over vehicle radios. Each day, the department's three supervisors inform Rooney what work is on tap.

"Residents are our eyes and ears out there," Rooney said.

Residents call when they notice problems with a road, shoulder or if someone is dumping dirt or debris where they aren't allowed.

The DPW operates under one golden rule.

"The key to maintenance is preventive maintenance. I try to apply the same to the road system. It's not as easy. But you catch your problems before they go too far," Rooney said.

DPW staff keep track of street and drain work and dust control for the city's 40 miles of gravel roads by mapping the entire city. The maps show what's been done and what needs to be done.

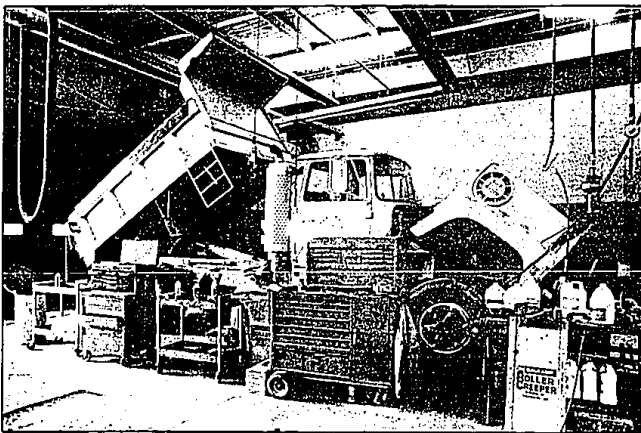
DPW also works with other city departments, such as special services and engineering. When called upon, the DPW will help with parks or any other city need outside their own responsibilities.

Like other city departments, the DPW tries to strike a balance between the private and public sectors. For some jobs, such as pavement stripping, contractors are hired because it's not cost efficient to buy the necessary machinery for that job, Rooney said.



Farmington Hills Department of Public Services crews repair road shoulders on Drake, south of 11 Mile. Ronnie Van Dyke operates the 10-yard dump truck at left. Dave Edwards runs the

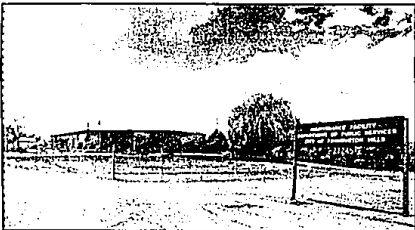
Gradall, the digging machine, in the middle. Wayne Smith is in the dump truck at right.



This is one of Farmington Hills' 10-yard tandem dump trucks undergoing repairs in one of the Department of Public Services maintenance bays.



Staff photos by Randy Borst



Farmington Hills Department of Public Services Maintenance Facility is on Halsted, near I-696.

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