Town is first in county to privatize service long provided by Highway Department

Town of Port Washington officials on Monday voted unanimously to hire a private contractor to plow and salt town roads this winter, becoming the first township in the county to privatize winter road maintenance.

The Town Board received two bids from private contractors for the service, and opted to hire Dave's Excavation and Grading of the Town of Port to handle the roadwork from Jan. 1 through May 1 instead of relying on the Ozaukee County Highway Department for snowplowing.

Officials said they were persuaded by the promise of considerable savings and the company's pledge to meet the town's requirement that roads be passable by 5 a.m. and clean by 7 a.m. after snowfalls.

"I'm about the money," Town Supr. Mike Didier said. "It's just so much cheaper, we can't not do it.

"It's mind boggling how a for-profit enterprise can cost so much less than a for-cost operation."

The bid submitted by Dave's Excavation calls for the town to pay $87 an hour for the use of a five-yard dump truck with an 11-foot plow and $102 an hour for a 3.5-yard loader with an 11-foot plow. The town will also pay 15 cents a pound for salt applied to the roads.

The other bid, from Jim's Maintenance Service of Grafton, called for charges of between $90 and $105 an hour for plowing and $80 an hour for salting.

In both cases, the town would purchase the salt used, officials agreed. This will be cheaper than having the contractor do it, they said, because the town doesn't pay sales tax and it can purchase the salt at the state contract price, which is less than private firms pay.

Those bids are significantly less than the price charged by the county, which averages $165 an hour, Town Chairman Jim Melichar said.

"When we get bids like this, where can we go wrong?" he asked.

Ozaukee County Public Works Director Bob Dreblow could not be reached for comment.

However, Dreblow said last month that if the towns privatize their winter road maintenance, they can't depend on the county to help out if things don't work out.

"Towns need to keep in mind that if they contract with private providers, we'll have to downsize personnel and equipment and there's no going back," Dreblow told Ozaukee Press.

“Towns will really be on their own. We won’t have the resources to help them.”

Ozaukee County provides plowing services for all the county townships except the Town of Cedarburg, which has its own road department.

Dreblow also noted that the county has full-time mechanics and a significant amount of equipment, including huge vee plows used to break up drifts and a large snow-thrower that private contractors don’t usually have.

The town generally budgets about $55,000 for snow and ice removal, officials said, noting the average cost per winter is probably about $45,000.

Part of the reason the county’s fee is so high is the fact it pays overtime for drivers who work before 7 a.m. and after 4 p.m., Melichar said.

“Act 10 is supposed to change that, but we don’t have any confirmation of that,” he said.

The county also charges the town a storage fee for equipment and a fee to assemble its bill, he said.

By privatizing the snow removal work, the town will better be able to hold someone accountable when roads aren’t cleared, Town Supr. Jim Rychtik said.

Both he and Melichar said they have received numerous calls in winter from people who need to get to work but can’t because their road isn’t clear by the time they need to leave.

But while Dave’s Excavating will clear the 22 miles of town roads early in the day, the Ozaukee County Highway Department will still be responsible for plowing county highways such as highways H, KW, KK and B, officials said.

“We can plow the town roads, but if you can’t get through the county roads, what does it help?” Melichar asked.

Town roads come last on the county’s priority list, officials said. The county is obligated to plow state roads first, then county highways and then town roads.

Didier expressed surprise that no one in the audience asked that the town continue its contract with the county.

“I think everybody’s just interested in saving money,” one man said. “Saving money and getting the same service — it’s a win-win.”

One resident expressed concern that neither of the bids listed a cost for trucks with wing plows, something he said is needed.

“If he needs it, he’ll buy it,” Didier said. “That’s what the private sector does.”

And while Dreblow last month touted the fact the county's equipment will plow ahead of ambulance and rescue squads when needed, Didier said that the City of Port Street Department crews typically plow for emergency vehicles during snowstorms.

Melichar said he also received a call from someone asking how the contractors would handle the situation if their equipment broke down, suggesting the town should consider hiring a back-up firm.

Dave Bley of Dave's Excavation said he has an agreement with another contractor who will back him up if needed.