



*Fighting Fires, Saving Lives, and Promoting Safety.*

**Shad Ahmed**  
*Deputy Director, Emergency Management*

MEMORANDUM

TO: Eileen M. Donoghue, City Manager *EMD*

FROM: Shad Ahmed, Deputy Director, Office of Emergency Management  
Christine Clancy, DPW Commissioner

DATE: February 9, 2021

SUBJECT: **COUNCIL MOTION OF 12/22/2020 BY COUNCILOR ELLIOT**  
REQ. CITY COUNCIL DISCUSS IMPLEMENTATION OF “BLUE LIGHT”  
SNOW PARKING BAN NOTIFICATION SYSTEM IN THE CITY

The City of Lowell’s Department of Public Works and Office of Emergency Management jointly investigated this request, researching community implementations as well as interviewing stakeholders in communities that have implemented these systems and consulting subject matter experts in this area.

**BACKGROUND:** Some cities have implemented blue or white lights to signal that a snow emergency parking ban is in effect or is about to take effect so that residents are aware of some actionable item, such as the need to move their vehicles from street-side parking to a designated snow parking area. Most of these systems were installed decades ago, when alert, warning and other communications methods were not as vast or as diversified as they are today.

Our findings show that most communities’ systems do not result in a high return on investment and that there were several concerns that would need to be addressed with these implementations, detailed below.

- (1) Superseded by other technologies: With social media platforms, emergency notification systems, and the advent of other connected solutions such as digital messaging systems, warning platforms are now expected to offer multi-hazard warning capabilities, while snow emergency signaling lights are considered to be a single-purpose notification channel.
- (2) Infrastructure concerns including high cost: DPW has determined that implementing these systems would require extensive capital and ongoing investment to support electric utility and communications signaling media (fiber or wireless, as copper has been phased

out). In addition to the initial cost to run these lines there would likely be recurring subscription and maintenance costs.

- (3) Confusion among the public: Some communities have reported repeated confusion among the public as to whether the light indicates they need to move their vehicle at the moment it is activated or by some time, potentially hours later, etc. This has reportedly become a pain point for some communities, especially as they have different meanings across every community that utilizes them.
- (4) Accessibility advantages negated: In part to mitigate the confusion noted above, some communities have begun requiring the public to access other media to find out what action is needed. This is the case in Salem, MA, which states that, “the activation of the blue snow emergency lights at key intersections around the City is a signal that residents should visit [www.salem.com](http://www.salem.com) for additional information and not a representation that a snow emergency parking ban is necessarily in effect at that precise time.” This negates the one accessibility advantage of reaching residents with limited communications technology and internet access.
- (5) Outreach and Education: As population changes, it becomes necessary to continually educate new residents and remind others regarding the purpose of the lights and how they are intended to function.

In the course of our research, we identified an alternative approach that we would propose for further investigation to address any concerns for reaching a larger audience. The City could expand its current outreach regarding snow emergencies to include additional sources for social media, radio and TV media, additional flexible options for emergency notification systems, and digital messaging boards strategically placed in the City. These options appear to be the most common methods for reaching wide audiences for snow emergencies.

While not preferred, we also noted that some cities have also implemented a metric-based activation in addition to these media outlets—i.e., when the local office of the National Weather Service forecasts a certain amount of snowfall, it is an automatic trigger for a parking ban. This practice is not widely utilized as it offers the least flexibility.

Please do not hesitate to advise if there are any other additional questions.