

City of Madison Streets & Urban Forestry Division

ONBOARDING VIDEO #3

Frequently Asked Questions – Snow & Ice Control

March 2026



Snow & Ice Basics

- **Two core elements of snow and ice response**

- 1. Salt Routes**
- 2. Citywide Plowing**





Salt Routes

When we treat the salt routes

- When it is actively snowing, the Streets Division deploys plows to maintain the “salt routes.”
- These roads are plowed and salted as needed for the entirety of the storm.



32 trucks are dispatched to the salt routes during most events.

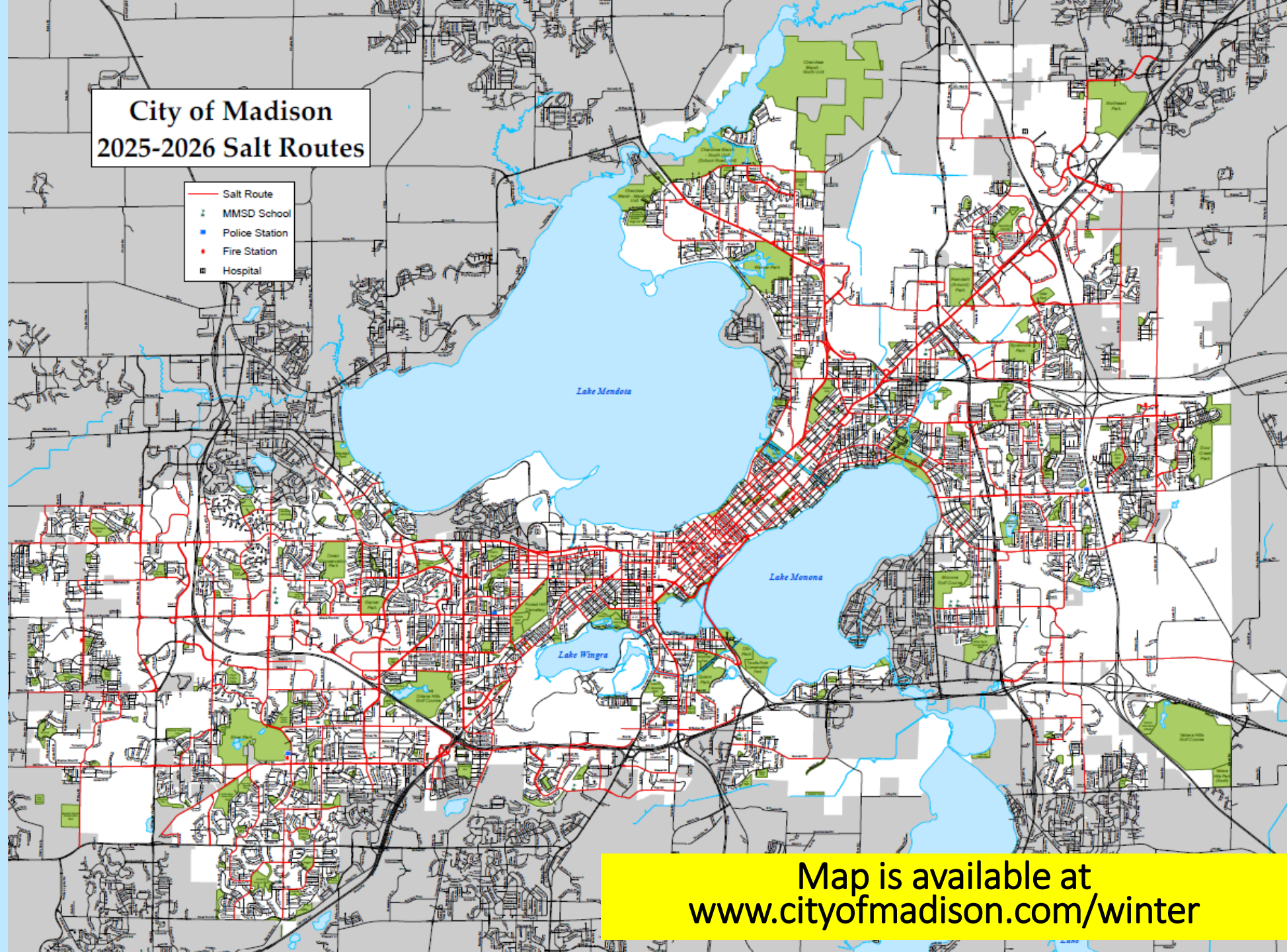
What are “salt routes”?

782 miles of traffic lanes that make up the main thoroughfares.

Each truck takes roughly 3 hours to complete 1 lap through route under best case conditions.

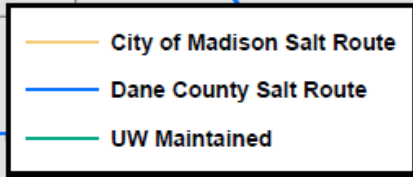
Used by Metro Buses, near schools, near emergency services (hospitals, fire stations, etc.)

Deploying salt only when & where needed major way to help control salt use.



Map is available at
www.cityofmadison.com/winter

Madison is not the only salt applicator in the area

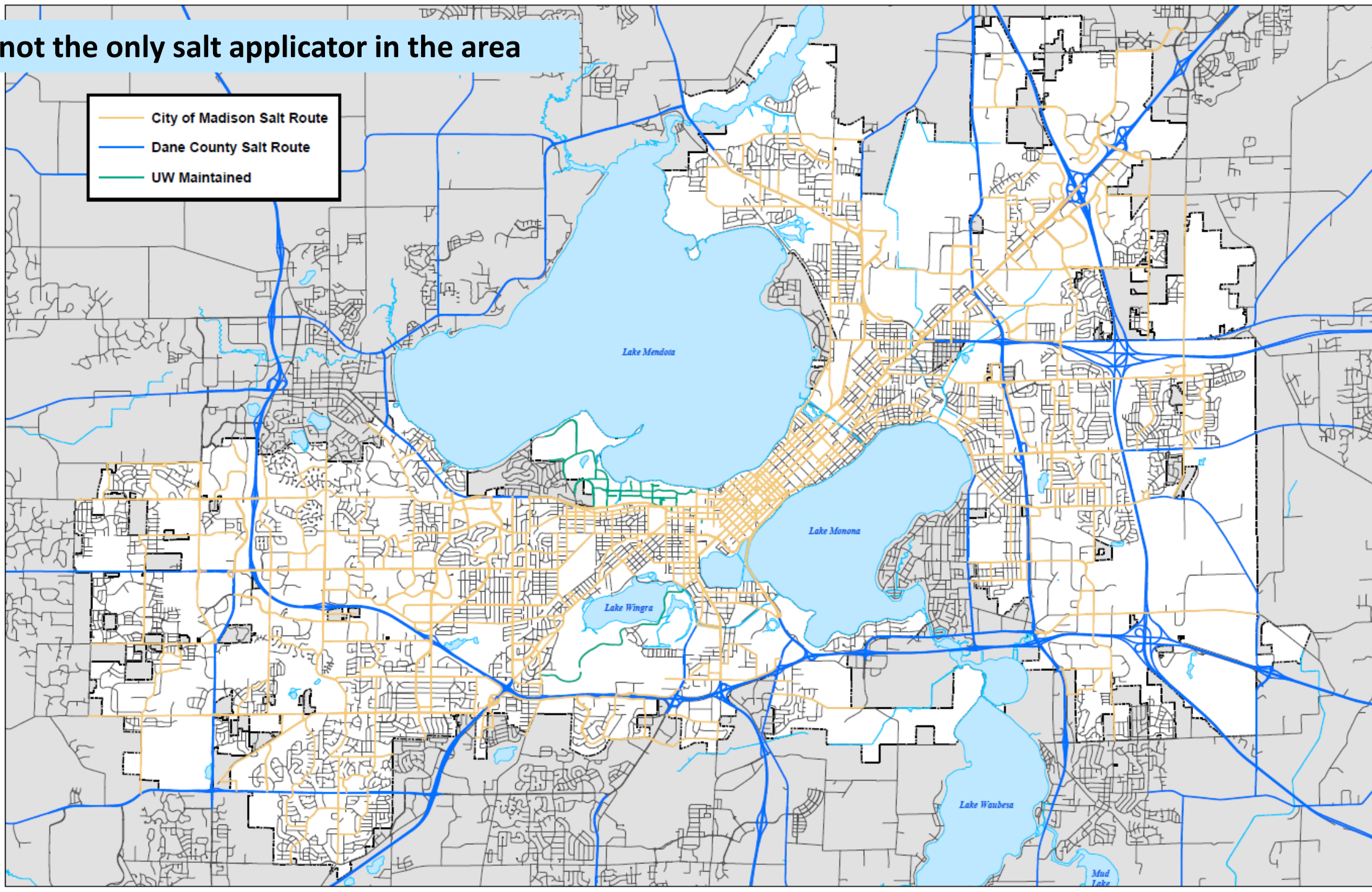


Dane County
Highway

University

Private lots &
roads

Other
municipalities





Salted Roads

Salt, time, temperature, and traffic combine to help make roads free from snow (mostly).

This is Olin Ave between S. Park Street and John Nolen Drive.

The Trouble with Salt

- Salt damages infrastructure
- All the salt put down on sidewalks, parking lots, and roads finds its way into our waters
- Enters the storm drains and out into our lakes & infiltrates our drinking water.
- This has been a known problem *for decades*. See the article in the photo from 1977.
- We **must** be cautious with salt



City wells fail to meet EPA salt standards

By WHITNEY GOULD
Of The Capital Times Staff

Although the city has cut back drastically on its use of de-icing road salt in recent years, the water in several Madison wells still contains salt concentrations above the level at which the Environmental Protection Agency recommends a warning for the sake of hypertension sufferers, University of Wisconsin researchers have found.

Dan Willard, the environmental studies professor who did the study, thinks the city probably should alert residents whose water comes from the affected wells. But City Health Director Karl Mohr says that would upset people needlessly when there is no real cause for alarm.

Using data collected by the city, Willard, Prince Beach and Tim Diehl traced the rise in sodium and chloride levels in 13 of the city's 27 wells between 1951 and 1975.

The increases, also reflected in the water in our lakes, parallel what until recently was a continuous growth of road salt use dating back to the '50s, Willard concluded. Much of the salt flushed off the streets seeps through soil into ground water which is the source of our drinking water.

The most dramatic jump was in Well No. 5 on North Randall Avenue, where sodium levels rose from three to 25 parts-per-million (ppm) in the 24-year period and chloride escalated from 19 to 55 ppm.

Two other wells of 14 tested had sodium levels above 20 ppm, the level at which the EPA advises a warning for those with high blood pressure, which is linked to the water-retention properties of sodium.

They were Well No. 2 on Vilas Avenue and Well No. 17 on South Hancock Street, according to Willard. Well No. 2 near Lake Wingra showed an increase in sodium from 10 ppm in 1951 to 35 ppm in 1972 and an increase in chloride of 3 ppm in 1951 to 23 ppm in 1975.

(The wells throughout the city are all interconnected. But in most cases, people living in a given area are getting their water from the nearest well, according to Water Utility officials.)

The elevated salt levels are well
(Continued on Page 4, Col. 3)

MADISON, WIS., Monday, June 27, 1977

City wells rather salty

(Continued on Page 4, Col. 3)

within the 250 ppm safety limit set by the U.S. Public Health Service for drinking water, and Willard stresses there is "no cause for alarm."

But he thinks it might be a good idea for the city to include a note in the water bills of people whose water supply comes from the affected wells, to alert those on low-salt diets.

"It probably should be something more than the warnings on cigarette packages, which nobody pays any attention to, and something less than 'Everybody should get out of town,'" he said.

But Mohr said he saw no need for such a notice. "I hate to do something like that unless it's absolutely necessary," he said. "In many cases you just alarm people for no reason. And in most instances where people have been diagnosed as hypertensive, their physicians are taking these things into account" in recommending limits on salt intake.

City Water Utility Manager Larry Russell agrees with Mohr. "Any kind of a general warning would be more of a scare than anything else," he says, noting, however, that at one point the city did send out a note to dieticians advising them of the rise in salt levels.

At the current levels, a person would have to consume huge quantities of water to be affected by the salt content, Russell said, and short of drinking distilled water, there's not much that anybody can do about the situation.

But Russell added that the city is watching the salt figures as indicators of ground water quality.

In the meantime, warns Russell, a larger health hazard for some people is softened drinking water, which contains salt concentrations as high as 100 ppm.

In most cases, the cold water coming out of a home faucet is not softened. But city inspectors, according to Russell, occasionally come upon a home where a water softener has been attached directly to the incoming water line, thus adding softening salts to the drinking water as well as that used for washing.

"It's not a large problem," he said, "but there probably are some people who are drinking softened water and don't know it."

Willard expects salt concentrations in the wells to decline in the next few years, to reflect reductions in the use of road salt. But it won't happen right away, he said, because ground water moves very slowly.

In the winter of 1972-73, the city dumped some 5,001 tons of de-icing salt on its streets, according to streets supervisor Lloyd Sarbacker. Concern about salt contamination prompted the City Council to order a program of gradual reduction. And by last winter, salt use had been cut back to 1,519 tons — a drop of 73 per cent.

"A rare example of protective legislation in time," Willard said of the salt cutbacks.

Salt Isn't Just a Madison Issue

The Washington Post

Scientists have found a 'sleeping giant' of environmental problems: Earth is getting saltier

Salt used to de-ice roads is the single biggest source of salt in the U.S.

October 31, 2023

milwaukee journal sentinel Jan. 14, 2025

Wisconsin waters have a road salt problem. Here's what to know, and how to help.

Chicago Tribune March 18, 2021

Salt may be a savior for roads, but it imperils Chicago-area water and wildlife. Some communities and agencies are working to change that.

9NEWS December 29, 2014

Study: Road salt polluting Denver's Cherry Creek

Vermont's Own WCAX Jun. 26, 2024

Road salt runoff causes increased chloride levels in Lake Champlain



Kitchener-Waterloo Nov 26, 2023

Reducing road salt use 'not something that can wait' as Ontario lakes see oxygen depletion, researcher says

Waterloo region's salt philosophy is 'applying the right amount in the right area,' manager says

k m u w January 25, 2023

Salt makes icy roads less dicey, but it poisons the land. Here's what Kansas is doing about it

THE MAINE MONITOR January 14, 2024

How pesticides, road salt threaten Maine's water supply



The world's freshwater is getting saltier. Why? MARCH 25, 2026



MISSOURI
Road salt runoff creates environmental harm to wildlife
Jan 14, 2025

91.3 WYSO January 31, 2024

Road salt use has doubled in the U.S., and it's polluting water. How Ohio is trying to prevent that.

The New York Times Mar 25, 2025
Salty Suburban Roads Are Clouding the Future of N.Y.C. Drinking Water

Detroit Free Press April 13, 2017

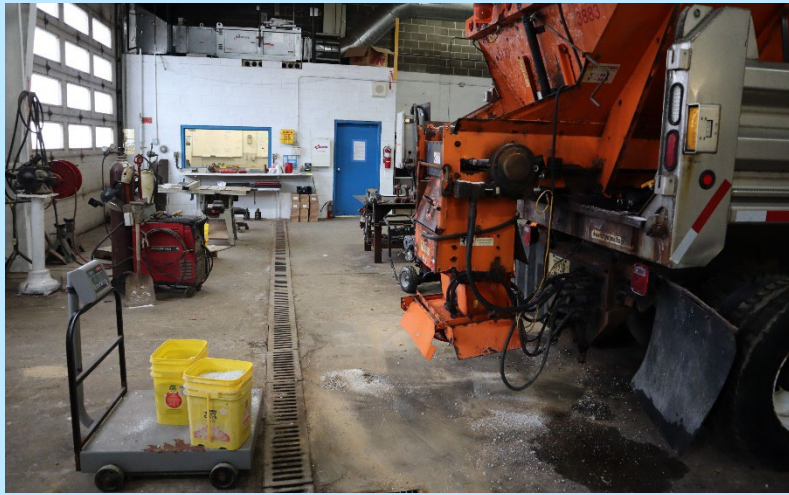
Michigan lakes are getting saltier; road salt to blame

If trend continues, study predicts, salt levels will present risk to aquatic ecosystem in inland lakes

Pre-treatment When Possible



Equipment Calibration



Salt Applicator Trainings



How does the Streets Division Control Salt Use



Salt Use Tracking



Use Right Amount for Weather



Try New Equipment

When it's it's too cold to salt.

This is Colony Drive between Inner and Gammon. It's part of the salt route for John Muir Elementary. Sand used for traction since temperatures were below 20 degrees.



Magnesium Chloride *(purchased in winter 2024/25)*



A yellow snowplow is shown from a front-quarter perspective, clearing a residential street during a snowstorm. The truck has a large black and orange blade at the front and is pushing a pile of snow. The street is lined with snow-covered houses and bare trees. The sky is overcast and falling snow is visible. A speed limit sign for 30 is visible on the right side of the road.

Citywide Plowing

WHEN WE PLOW



- Three or more inches of snow accumulated on the roads and the storm is at or near its end.
- Citywide plowing takes 12 – 14 hours from start to finish

This is a plowed residential street.
This is normal.



Without salt and regular traffic, residential streets will have a compacted layer of snow and ice on them after plowing.

Plows cannot peel up snow and ice from the road.

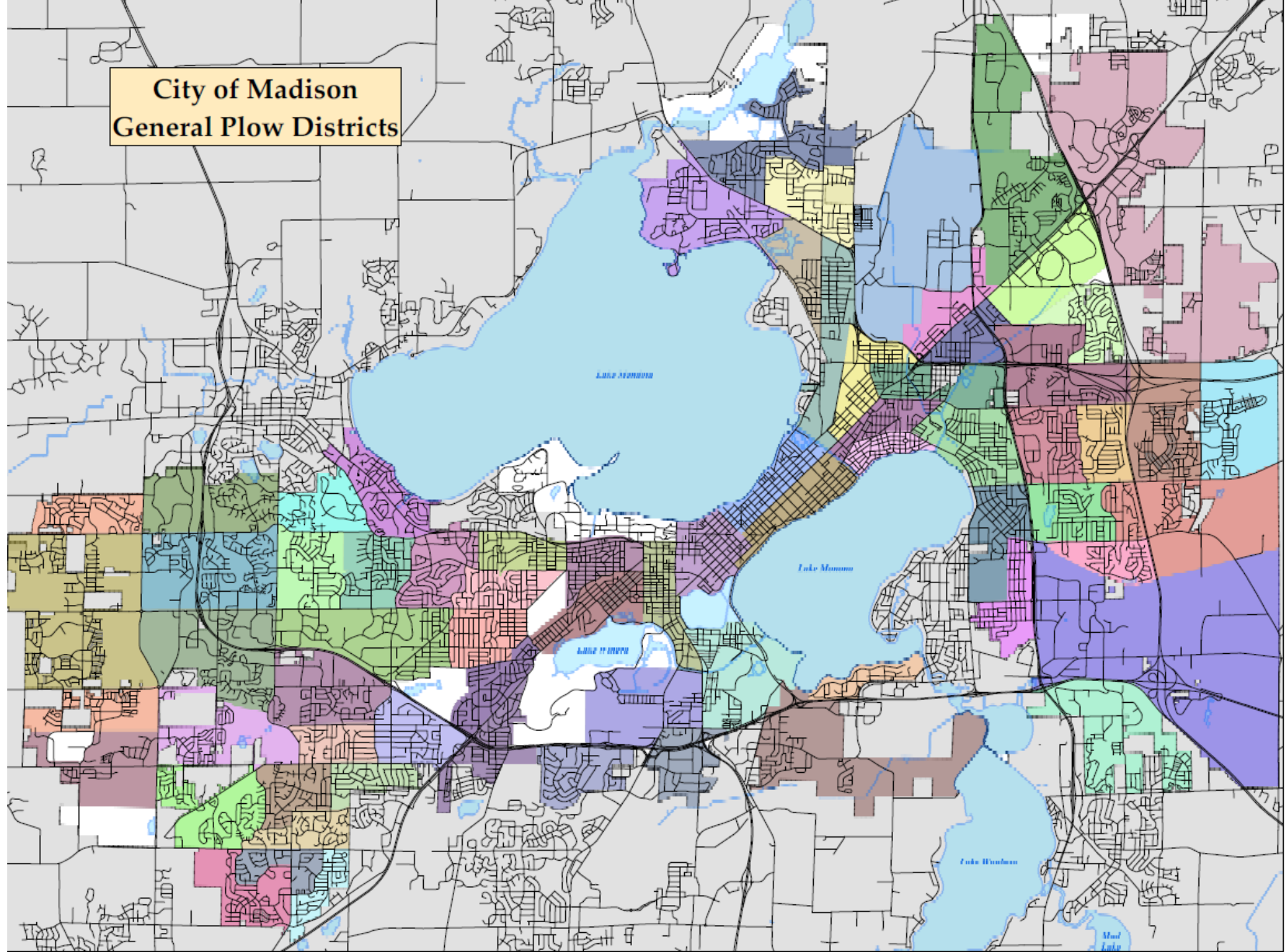
And roads are crowned to help drainage while plows are flat.

Plow deployment

For citywide plowing, city is divided into over 60 different sub-areas.

All of these areas are assigned equipment and they start plowing at the same time.

No one is assigned to be last.



What it Takes to Plow All Madison Streets



From City Fleet (Streets & Other Public Works:

- 10 Bobcat-like vehicles
- 12 Pickup truck plows
- 2 Grader
- 14 Loaders
- 80 Plow trucks

**Total combined
vehicles:
163**

From Heavy Equipment Contractors:

- 2 Graders
- 33 Loaders
- 9 Plow trucks
- 1 Tractors

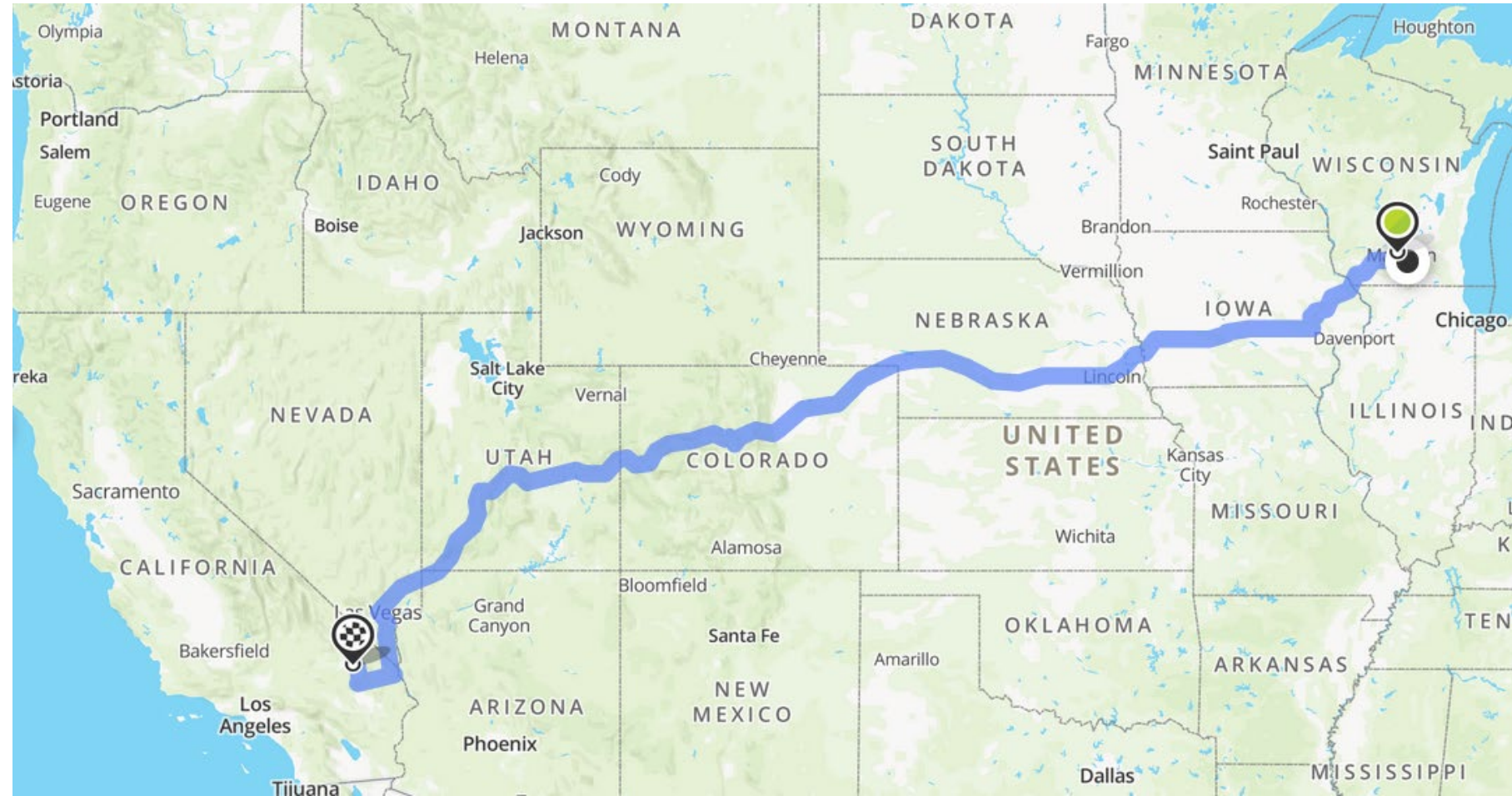
Why does it take so long to plow the whole city?

Madison has roughly 1,858 miles of traffic lanes to cover.

That's like driving from Madison, WI to the Mojave Desert in California

It just takes a lot of time.

(Plows drive up and down streets multiple times - likely traveling well over 1,800 miles to plow everything)



And it's more than just traffic lane miles...

The 1,850 miles of travel lanes does not include the 200+ miles of paths & sidewalks Streets, Engineering, and Parks plows.

Nor does it include the 1,100 bus stops plowed by Streets, Engineering, and Parks.

Or the State Street / Capitol Square work done by the Parks Division

And more! Snow is *a lot* of work.



Frequently Asked Questions



Why did the snowplow block my driveway?



- It's the physics of plowing a street curb-to-curb
- It is not intentional
- Yes, it is unavoidable

I live in a cul-de-sac and I have concerns about plowing...

Roads like this are fundamentally incompatible with snowplowing quickly – and we have ***hundreds*** in Madison. We make it work the best we can, but outcome is not ideal for every resident.



There's snow in front of my mailbox! The USPS won't deliver my mail.

The Streets Division aims to plow snow all the way to the curb.

Sometimes plows make mistakes and the snow needs to be cleared back closer to the curb, but sometimes homeowners will still need to clear out from the mailbox for their mail carrier.



The plow damaged the terrace! Now what?

Streets will repair terraces damaged by snowplows in the spring.

What is happening is that plows need to rub against the curb to find it in the snow. Sometimes the snow will ramp the plow up on top of the curb and the grass in this right of way space could get damaged, especially if the ground is soft.

Report any spots that are damaged in the report-a-problem system.



The plow damaged my mailbox! Now what?

Use the report-a-problem system to report these situations.

There is a process in place for Streets Division supervisors to look into these situations.

Not every mailbox damage is the fault of the plow driver, so we investigate each complaint.

In instances where the plow did, in fact, strike the mailbox the homeowner is eligible for a \$75 reimbursement.



What is alternate side parking?

Alternate side parking is in effect each night 1am to 7am from November 15 to March 15 for people who park on the street outside of the Snow Emergency Zone.*

On ODD numbered days, you need your car parked on the ODD side of the street between the hours of 1am and 7am.

On EVEN numbered days, you need your car parked on the EVEN side of the street between the hours of 1am and 7am.

Parking Enforcement issues tickets for violations of these rules.

Tickets are \$20 when a Snow Emergency is not in effect.

November 15 - March 15

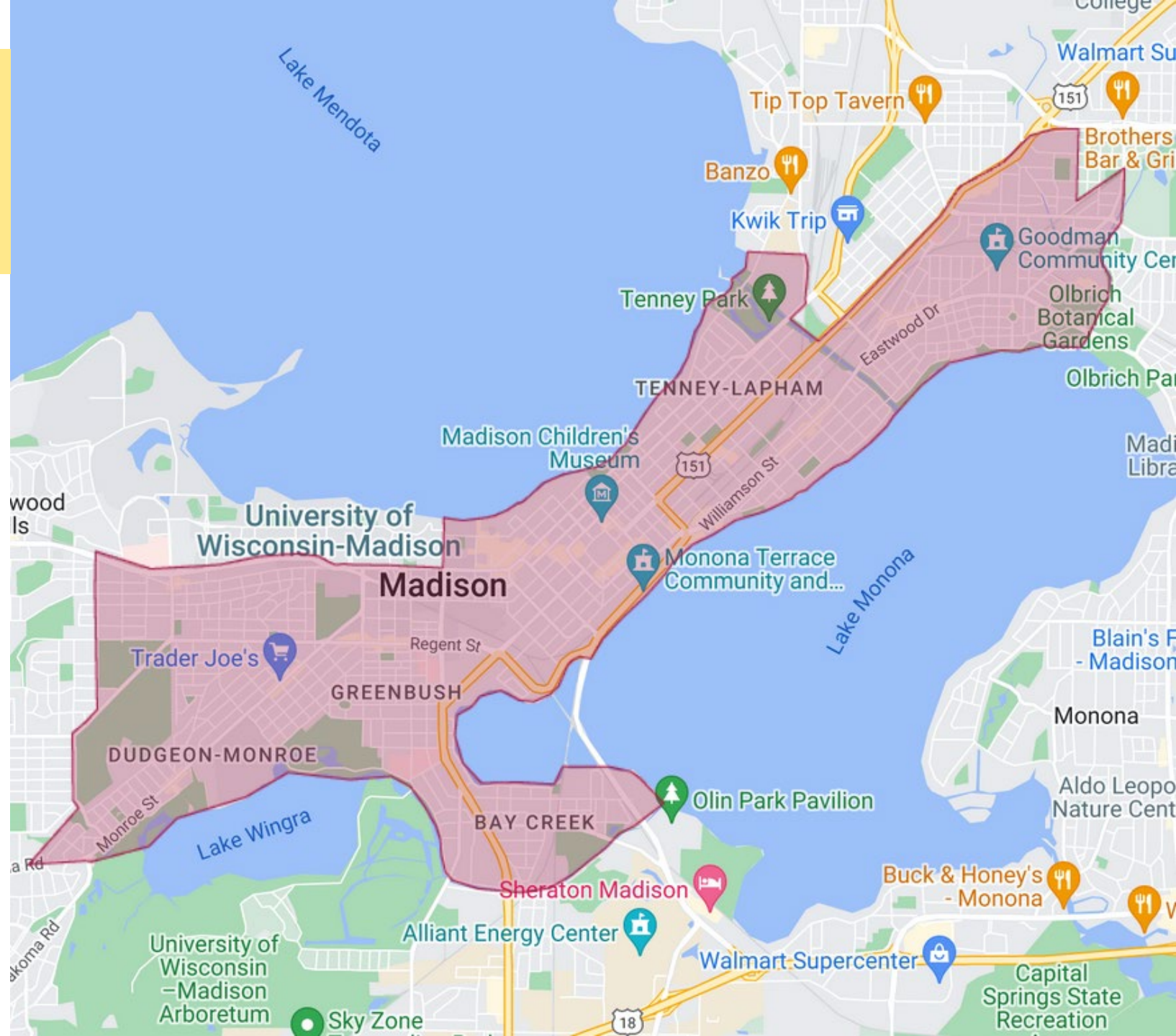


November 15 - March 15



What is a “snow emergency”?

When snow emergencies are declared, every vehicle parked on the street within the entire City must follow alternate side parking rules - including Snow Emergency Zone.



**Snow emergency rules changing...*

Parking Division is rolling out changes to the alternate side parking rule over the next few years to make a system that's easier for people to follow and produces better outcomes.



www.cityofmadison.com/Winter

- Snow Plow Updates
- Snow Emergency Alerts
- Snow Emergency Text Alerts
- Alternate Side Parking Text Alerts
- Sidewalk Snow Shoveling Updates



- Salt Usage Guidance
- Locations for Free Sand
- Winter Recreation Opportunities
- Winter Biking Tips



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