

# Parishes to snow: Bring it on

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After his parish budget was hit hard by the unanticipated costs of frequent snow removal last winter, St. Clare's Father Jesse Bolger reached out to some owners of construction companies in his church's Hispanic community.

Was there anything they could do to help?

Vlas Antonio Alsaro, a member of the Essex parish and owner of J&D Framing Construction in Middle River, stepped forward. As part of his tithing, he agreed to provide snow removal services for St. Clare at half the cost.

"It's a way of supporting the church," Alsaro said.

As Father Bolger put it, pastors have to "think on your toes and be creative" at a time when money is tight and more snow might be on the horizon.

The priest, who has earmarked a bit more for snow removal this season, isn't alone as pastors are making advance preparations to keep their parking lots and sidewalks clear without busting their budgets.

Father Gerard Francik, pastor of St. Mark in Fallston, has budgeted \$10,000 for snow removal - money that was not in the budget last winter. Doors and windows have been already been weatherproofed and oil was pre-purchased at a lower rate.

"We were caught off guard by the amount of snow last winter," he said, adding that the parish will be ready this time.

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William Baird, executive director of the archdiocesan management services department, said many parishes have learned from the bad weather of previous years. After the Baltimore area was socked with multiple blizzards over the winter of 2009-10, he noted that an increasing number of pastors turned to the electronic funds transfer model for offertory collections. Even if Mass is canceled, Baird said, parishioners can still provide financial support for their church.

"Pastors were more thoughtful about preparing for those things relative to educating parishioners that even if there's bad weather, the parish still operates and still has obligations," Baird said. "Donors have been very generous to help them keep up with that."

The archdiocese works with parishes to help them maintain their boilers, which are covered under an archdiocesan insurance program that covers more than 200 properties, Baird added.

"Spending anything on snow removal is more than you want to spend, obviously,"

said Clarence Bryant. As director of management services for the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland and the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore, Bryant is responsible for overseeing the churches' snow removal, including the clearing of the cathedral's large parking lot. Despite Bryant's qualms, chances are that snow removal will use its share of his maintenance budgets this year.

Baltimore meteorologist Mike Masco said Nov. 6 this winter "looks to be just as rough if not worse" than last winter, when all-time March low temperatures were recorded in Baltimore, and heavy snowfall repeatedly blanketed the region.

After 2010's "Snowmageddon," the cathedral boosted its snow removal budget, Bryant said. It mitigates costs by removing a snowfall's first three inches itself, before responsibility shifts to a snow-removal company. It also rents two-thirds of its parking lot to Loyola University Maryland, which helps with snow removal.

St. John the Evangelist in Severna Park was among parishes that exceeded snow and ice removal budgets last year. Allen Jones, St. John's director of parish operations-controller, called the overage "substantial," but declined to give specific figures. To pay for it, the parish took an extra collection and delayed other projects and expenses. It also increased this year's budget, but has also tried to control costs by purchasing salt early and negotiating low rates with its snow removal company, Jones said.

"We were prepared last year," he said, "but it just kept coming."

Ice was the parish's biggest challenge, he said, due to several rapid thaws and refreezes. Allen spent a considerable amount of time salting the parking lot, as well walkways between the parish school and its unattached classrooms.

"When you have all those kids walking up and down, it causes a different kind of ice formation on our walkways," he added. "The understanding is that we're out there to protect them as much as possible, and there's a cost associated with that."

This year, St. John stockpiled snowmelt, and had it ready by exterior doorways in November.

"We feel that we're prepared as best as we can," Jones said.

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