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“Street Sweepers”



It's a job vital to the health and safety of Norfolk citizens and it's also environmentally friendly. Street sweeping has been around ever since there were thoroughfares for people to walk and drive on. City of Norfolk employees Dan Schmidt and Pat Ruitenberg are on the front lines of cleaning the streets.

Schmidt has been sweeping streets in Norfolk for 12 years, Pat for two and a half years. Both have seen the importance

of keeping a city's streets clean.

“It's a health issue. From picking up dead animals to combating dust problems of dirty streets, a city needs to have streets clean for its citizens. There are a lot of contaminants in the soil and trash on the streets. Research has shown the importance of keeping them clean,” Schmidt said.

The two men work ten hour shifts Monday through Thursday from late February until the end of November- anytime the temperature is above 32 degrees. They not only pick up dirt and gravel on the streets, the sweeping machines also pick up small dead animals like squirrels, rabbits, birds and an opossum or two. There have also been hypodermic needles, broken glass, and rocks found in the debris the machine picks up.

Schmidt drives a 2008 Tynco-built street sweeper and, since June, Ruitenberg has been driving a 2011 model. Both machines cost approximately \$140,000 and will serve the city for about seven years.

The regenerative street sweepers have large steel bristles that brush the dirt up with the help of a small spray of water that keeps the dust from flying. A fan blowing at 1600-1800 revolutions per minute forces air down onto the street breaking up the larger particles and blowing them to the side and up into a hopper that is able to hold six cubic yards of debris. That debris is dumped about twice a day at the street division headquarters on 1010 South 8th Street. The debris is then loaded onto trucks and hauled to the transfer station where the larger items are screened out. The sand and gravel that remains is used for street projects.

"A lot of the backfill for the new shower and restrooms at Ta-Ha-Zouka came from the dirt we had taken off the streets," Schmidt said.

Safety is a big factor in keeping the streets clean. Ruitenberg cleans mostly the more heavily trafficked areas of town and has been concentrating on keeping First Street in front of Veterans Memorial Park clean from the construction dirt that filters onto the street.

"The dirt and loose gravel left on a street makes it hazardous to drive on as does driving around debris. We pick up nails that might otherwise end up in someone's tire," Ruitenberg said.

The sweepers are able to pick up objects less than 12 inches wide. The machines are not meant to pick up large branches or lawn clippings.

"People think they can sweep their grass clippings or leaves into the street for the sweeper to pick up but our hoppers aren't meant to hold that much debris. It is considered littering to put anything into the street and people can be ticketed if they do so," Schmidt said.

The strong storms that have hit Norfolk this summer have contributed to a large amount of branches, shingles and trash in the streets. Because the sweepers aren't meant to pick up those large items, Ruitenberg and Schmidt many times find themselves stopping the sweepers and getting out, to put the branches or other items on the lawn next to the street. Schmidt showed a large box he has attached on the front of the sweeper he drives to hold items he has to get out and pick up. Last week his box held a child's ball, a small wheel, chunks of concrete, a piece of rebar, a shingle and rocks of all sizes. In the past they've found toys, tools and even money that gets screened out of the street debris.

In the spring, the street sweepers pick up the street salt and all the trash that has accumulated over the winter. Right around the Fourth of July, they start to pick up lots of fireworks trash. Both men said they know when someone has left unlit fireworks on the street as they are ignited when steel bristles of the sweeper hit them.

Since 85% of all the dirt is three feet from the curb, both men sit at steering wheels situated on the right side of the street sweep cab. There is another steering wheel on the left side of the cab for sweeping next to medians.

The street sweepers have a positive environmental impact as they pick up dirt and trash that might otherwise go into the storm drains and end up in the river. Water that enters the storm drains is not treated but goes directly to the natural waterways. No chemicals are used when cleaning the streets.

Ruitenberg and Schmidt both said that though it's doubtful gravel will hit a vehicle driving behind a street sweeper, drivers should stay at least a car's length behind the sweeper and give the sweeper room to make wide turns at intersections. The sweepers travel at only two to three miles per hour so they also ask that citizens be patient when driving behind a sweeper and to watch the lit arrow board on the top of the sweeper telling them which side of the sweeper to pass on.

The men are also the "eyes of the city" and have been able to report loose dogs and erratic drivers as they leave their six and a half feet swaths of clean street. They also swish out and clean the street of standing water that would otherwise harbor mosquitoes and they clean the streets ahead of the line painters.

"We provide the citizens with a valuable service that helps keep the city safe and clean," Schmidt said.