

# Winter weather nightmare: Alton Public Works Director said his office did best they could

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer  
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**ALTON** - Many Alton residents have voiced their complaints about their perceived lack of salt trucks over the weekend following a "perfect storm" of bad driving conditions.

**Alton Public Works Director Bob Barnhart** said his office did they best job possible given the circumstances. He said the first salt trucks were dispatched Friday around 4:30

p.m., after a misty rain began falling over the River Bend area. He said forecasts for that day were extremely conflicting, with some predicting little to no precipitation and others predicting significant. He said the fluctuating temperatures added to the hassle of the public works department. By the time that mist began to freeze, however, many motorists did not see the benefit of the salt trucks.

Residents near **State Street** hill, where a nearly-viral video of a Cadillac SUV plowing into a streetlight was shot, claim they did not see salt trucks until nearly two hours following the storm. One resident, who wished to remain anonymous, said a concerned citizen utilized barricades the city used to block streets for sewer repairs to close State Street - a move that resident said saved countless vehicles and possibly a few lives.

Barnhart blames the weather itself for the catastrophic conditions. He said the salt trucks were hitting brick streets, hills and high-traffic areas first. He said salt was failing over the weekend for two reasons; one being liquid precipitation washing away the earlier layer of salt, and the other being extremely low temperatures rendering the salt ineffective. Barnhart said the public works department added calcium chloride to the salt mix, which lowered the freezing point even further.



"It was so cold out, a lot of salt and other ice-fighting methods were ineffective," he said. "When it was above freezing, the rain would wash it away, or it would melt and refreeze at a lower temperature. We added calcium chloride to the salt, which made it more effective as temperatures fell into single digits. Saturday was basically identical to Friday as extremely low temperatures created a freezing mist. It gave us all the ingredients of a perfect storm, with light mist and freezing temperatures creating black ice."

He said the increased price of salt did not play a factor in the weekend weather fiasco. Salt prices when Barnhart first started working for the city were \$40-\$50 a ton. That number nearly tripled in 2014, when salt prices spiked. Currently, he said the city pays as much as \$60 a ton for salt. Barnhart said price concerns do not play a factor in the decision to salt the roads. He said concern for public safety dictated that.

"We pride ourselves in taking care of the streets," Barnhart said. "We are here to ensure people can travel safely and our first responders can get where they need to go. Sometimes storms take us by surprise, but most of the time we work on being proactive instead of reactive."

Most of the damage incurred by the weekend weather will cost motorists and insurance companies, but Barnhart said the **City of Alton** will file an insurance claim on the streetlight toppled by that collision with the SUV on State Street. He said he was not sure if the cost for replacement will go to the city's insurance or the insurance of the motorists. He said fault would have to be decided first. The cost of that streetlight's replacement may be a few thousand dollars, he said.



