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**Upside: less environmental impact**

**High prices, short supplies could mean salting only on main streets and intersections**

Winter may seem far away to most, but the Village of Oak Park is busy preparing for the inevitable snowy roads even as skyrocketing salt prices and industry declared shortages have officials facing the tough decision of how much is enough to keep the roadways safe for motorists.

This year's annual state bidding process for salt that combines requests from multiple municipalities in what is supposed to generate prices that are more competitive, drew few bids and quadrupled price quotes. Suppliers only bid on a portion of the requests, leaving Oak Park and nearly 160 other Illinois communities on their own to track down salt supplies from far-flung destinations at prices as much as four times higher than last year.

"We are in a really tough spot," said Village Manager Tom Barwin. "Last year, we used about 7,000 tons of salt that cost about \$220,000. To get that same quantity this year, we will have to pay \$800,000 or more – that is, if we can even find a supplier willing to provide that quantity."

What that could mean for motorists in Oak Park, Barwin said, is plowed, but unsalted residential streets, an approach common in many northern Illinois communities where the focus is on main streets and intersections.

Oak Park faced a similar situation toward the end of last winter, as salt stockpiles dwindled and clogged water transportation routes made timely resupply difficult. Village crews continued to plow, but had to ration the salt, mix it with sand and prioritize deicing efforts to make sure the community's busiest streets and intersections were clear.

This year, the Village likely will have to begin the season with the same strategy that was in place at end of last season, officials say. Even if taxpayers are willing to quadruple what they paid for salt last year, sufficient quantities of salt to match the service levels of previous years may not even be available if what industry officials say is true about the supply end of the free market equation.

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**Winter salt expensive, in short supply  
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The Village Board has asked the Illinois Attorney General to investigate whether the salt companies are manipulating supplies to drive up prices. Several northern Illinois communities also filed a formal protest with Central Management Services, the state agency that manages the annual salt procurement process, questioning its bidding practices.

In the meantime, Oak Park is preparing to purchase about 3,500 tons of salt at a cost of nearly \$400,000 – essentially paying three times more for half as much salt as last year, Barwin said.

"We don't have many options when it comes to price or supply," he said.

But there is an upside to having to use less salt, according to the Village Manager. Less salt means less stress on the pavement and parkway vegetation where the corrosive deicer takes a considerable toll.

"In my 25 years of experience, I have seen few communities plow and salt as aggressively as Oak Park," Barwin said. "It is no wonder we have so many issues with cracked pavement and potholes.

"But I also understand the safety concerns many residents have about snow-covered streets. They can rest assured that regardless of the supply of salt, we will continue to plow all streets and do our best to keep the roads clear."

Barwin said the Village would continue to search for more salt – hopefully at prices that are more reasonable – and seek other affordable, more environmentally friendly deicers.

"If the other communities in the same boat as Oak Park end up buying less salt, too, perhaps the forces of supply and demand will swing back in favor of the purchasers by next season," he said.

Residents can help minimize the impact of less salt, officials say, by taking a few simple steps like driving slower on streets with snow, not following so close and giving themselves a little extra time to get to their destinations.

For more information on Village snow removal programs and emergency parking rules, visit [www.oak-park.us/snow](http://www.oak-park.us/snow).

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