

Vermont Supreme Court: Snow and Snowplowing are Facts of Life in Vermont; Trespass and Takings Claims must be Dismissed.

In a decision very favorable to Vermont municipalities, the Vermont Supreme Court has held that plowing snow onto property adjacent to a public highway is not a trespass or unconstitutional taking of property for public use. *Ondovchik Family Limited Partnership v. Agency of Transportation*, 2010 VT 35

The plaintiff, Ondovchik Family Limited Partnership (OFLP), is a property owner in Shelburne. As a result of the expansion of State Route 7, a building on the property is located less than eight feet from the highway. OFLP complained that the Vermont Agency of Transportation's (VTrans') snowplows propel snow and contaminated water runoff across the sidewalk and onto OFLP's building and brought suit. The Vermont Supreme Court held that VTrans is under a lawful duty to remove snow from Vermont's highways and this duty carries with it the privilege to deposit snow on adjacent property so long as this action is reasonably necessary to performance of the duty. VTrans has discretion to choose an efficient method of removing snow, even if the method it chooses causes some intrusion into or incidental damage to adjacent property.

OFLP also asserted that VTrans' plowing activities resulted in a taking of its property for public use, in violation of the Fifth Amendment of the United States Constitution and Article 2 of the Vermont Constitution. The Supreme Court rejected this argument as well, stating, "When winter road maintenance activities result in intermittent snow throw and water runoff, it is an incidental incursion only and does not represent the kind of invasion that would amount to a taking." OFLP's injury was no different than those of other landowners whose property fronts on plowed roads, all of whom benefit from having the roads plowed and who must "deal with the consequential and incidental incursions and damage that snow throw and water runoff may cause." The Court noted that "snow and snowplowing are facts of life in Vermont, and we do not find a cause of action when defendant had done nothing more than protect public safety by plowing roads that it has an ongoing legal duty to plow."

Vermont municipalities maintain approximately 11,500 miles of local highways, about five times the number of miles maintained by the state. The Supreme Court's common sense approach to the inevitable consequence of winter and snowplowing is welcomed by all. A copy of the decision is at <http://info.libraries.vermont.gov/supct/current/op2009-182.html>

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