

In Canandaigua: Laser-guided snowplows



 BUY PHOTO

 HIDE CAPTION

Jack Haley/Messenger Post Media The Town of Canandaigua has two plows equipped with a laser that helps the driver avoid clipping things such as cars and mailboxes.

By Mike Murphy / mmurphy@messengerpostmedia.com
Posted Feb 25, 2015 at 2:01 AM

Canandaigua Highway Department is trying out a futuristic device to help snowplows navigate

CANANDAIGUA — Don't worry, the blinding snow isn't playing tricks on your winter-weary eyes.

What you might have seen while creeping about on the wind-swept and snow-covered roads could actually have been a green laser beam. And it may be helping to make the roads safer during the winter snow-plowing season.

The Canandaigua Highway Department this winter is trying out two LaserLines, which are laser-guided devices mounted on snowplows.

The device shoots out a 2-inch diameter beam about 30 to 60 feet in front of the plow, which provides for a point of reference so a driver can correctly line up the plow blade and get as close

to the obstacle as possible, according to Matt Aquino, who works in sales and marketing at Northern Supply Inc. The Bloomfield company sells the device.

“It definitely is futuristic and it does look intimidating,” Aquino said. “The science behind it isn’t all that crazy.”

Basically, it’s a fancy, weather-resistant laser pointer, which helps a driver avoid parked cars, oncoming cars and mailboxes — some of which are hidden by snow from the sights of the plow driver.

“It seems the worse the conditions, the more it helps the operator,” Aquino said.

Two of the devices were mounted on trucks in December, said Canandaigua Highway Superintendent Jim Fletcher.

The idea was to try out the devices, which cost \$2,600 each, on narrow roads with lots of mailboxes, such as West Lake Road and neighborhoods in the north end of town.

“So far they have worked out very well,” Fletcher said.

Deep snow, heavy storms and whiteout conditions often spell trouble for mailboxes when snowplows are clearing roads.

Already the devices have helped reduce the number of boxes hit, Fletcher said. “We haven’t hit nearly as many this year as last year,” he said.

Highway departments are always pressed for funding, but Aquino said the devices also can help municipalities save money in the long run.

Collisions obviously can result in damage to the trucks. The total replacement costs of parts on a wing plow can run up to \$10,000, not including labor.

Many drivers rely on experience, touch and perhaps a bit of good old-fashioned moxie when clearing snow. The devices take away some of the guessing game for drivers and help alleviate driver fatigue.

“It gives the driver peace of mind knowing he’s not going to hit something,” Fletcher said.

Canandaigua is believed to be the first local municipality in the immediate area to try the device, Aquino said.

The Genesee Valley region of the state Department of Transportation is aware of the devices, said DOT spokesperson Lori Maher, who said the idea is worth looking into.

“We’re receptive to it,” Maher said.

Bristol Supervisor Bob Green said the devices would have to prove to themselves to be safer and cost-effective, but one thing is certain: “It sounds like Star Trek-like technology,” Green said.

The devices are used in heavy snow areas out west, including Alaska, Utah, Colorado and Minnesota, and closer to home in Maine, Aquino said.

“We thought it would be a nice fit for the snowy conditions around here,” Aquino said. “More important, it is a much safer way to plow.”

Canandaigua residents have noticed, as Fletcher has fielded questions asking if they really saw what they thought they saw.

And there is a reason why they are being seen. The green color provides the best contrast in light and dark situations, according to the manufacturer.

“Bright green is the easiest for the eye to see,” Aquino said.

Busted boxes

Despite the best of intentions, mailboxes are damaged or destroyed by snowplows in the winter months, although dealing with the issue depends on the town and the circumstances.

Canandaigua will replace the mailbox if the post is not damaged, according to Highway Superintendent Jim Fletcher. In some cases, a temporary box will be erected and a standard black box will be put up in the spring — but farther back from the road.

Bristol, for example, contends it is not generally responsible for them, although if a hits one directly, the town will come back with a replacement, Supervisor Bob Green said.

“Most people are understanding,” Green said. “It’s been a hard winter and crews have a tough job. We’re in it together.”



 BUY PHOTO

 HIDE CAPTION

Jack Haley/Messenger Post Media Austin Mincer looks down at the control panel (lower left) for the laser that helps Canandaigua plow drivers identify objects they might otherwise hit or clip. The drivers have a couple of options to control the light.



 BUY PHOTO

 HIDE CAPTION

Jack Haley/Messenger Post Media People have noticed the green light, especially at night, on a couple of snowplows from the Town of Canandaigua.