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Dead End

Growing evidence suggests the cul-de-sac costs more in city services.

by JOHN MICHLIG

One snowy morning, upon hearing the scrape of a city plow as it entered my cul-de-sac, I called my 6-year-old daughter to the window to watch the fascinating snowplow ballet. I was just about to point out a particularly deft move when the plow demolished our mailbox.

Jerry Schaefer, Franklin's superintendent of public works, estimates about 100 mailboxes succumb per season. In a city with an annual snowfall of nearly 50 inches, cul-de-sacs have become an expensive amenity, and not just due to the cost of replacing mailboxes.

A plow can generally clear six to eight traditional streets in the time it takes to deal with one cul-de-sac, which is a 90-foot asphalt circle (on average) comprised of hazards seen and unseen. Operators must carefully locate nooks to pile snow safely and without generating a homeowner complaint. Counting 16 houses — eight per side — on a straight, block-long street in an average low-density subdivision, a plow will clear streets directly serving 96 to 128 homes in the same time needed for one cul-de-sac.

"A cul-de-sac takes longer, by far," says Schaefer. "You could easily plow a mile of street in the time you spend on a cul-de-sac."

In Franklin, 16 snowplowing crews are responsible for clearing, salting and de-icing 211 cul-de-sacs, the city's 2010 budget shows. Daunting as that may be, it pales next to an estimated 446 cul-de-sacs in Brookfield, while Mequon has some 250 and Oak Creek boasts about 100, officials for those three cities say.

"From a resident standpoint, they're very desirable. You have less traffic; it's a quieter feel," says Tom Grisa, Brookfield's director of public works. "But from a public works perspective, they're significantly less efficient and significantly more costly to maintain than a normal grid of streets."

The increased costs for cul-de-sac snowplowing can be a significant drag on already strained municipal finances. In 2009, Franklin budgeted \$40,000 in plow crew overtime, but by year's end had spent an estimated \$70,100. The 2010 budget requests \$58,262 for plow crew overtime, while the Highway Department expects a 42 percent increase in the cost of road salt.

The cul-de-sac was popularized in America by a 1929 development in Fair Lawn, N.J., called Radburn. At first, they were generally reserved for areas along ridgelines and near steep topography where no road could reasonably continue. However, post-World War II developers found the configuration allowed for more home plots on less paved asphalt, lowering construction costs while attracting homebuyers who felt extra security in having one entrance to their small enclave. Cul-de-sacs quickly became the dominant feature in subdivisions across the country and in Milwaukee's suburbs.

But urban experts are raising more and more questions about them. A study by the Charlotte, N.C., Department of Transportation found they decrease efficiency and increase costs of fire departments. A study by the University of Connecticut's Center for Transportation and Urban Planning found cul-de-sacs had more auto accidents.

"A cul-de-sac is basically a big, long driveway that ends at your house," says John Wasik, author of *The Cul-de-Sac Syndrome: Turning Around the Unsustainable American Dream*. "It's not very efficient from a connectivity standpoint."

Virginia has become the first state to limit the development of these streets. Charlotte has taken similar action, as have Portland, Maine, and Austin, Texas. In Milwaukee's suburbs, there's been no such movement. Meaning there will be more mailboxes to replace in the years to come. ■