

InterFleet™ Enhances City of Vaughan's Customer Service

"Where is My Snowplow" website reduces call centre inquiries and improves accountability

Highlights

Industry

- City Government

Size

- 238,870 residents
- 274 km² (106 sq mi) area
- 920 km (572 mi) of roadways

Organizational Needs

- Enhance customer service
- Reduce resources required to service customer inquiries
- Increase overall efficiency and accountability

InterFleet™ GPS Solution

- 134 InterFleet™ equipped snow plows
- The "Where is My Snow Plow" website



The Situation: The City of Vaughan and Winter

The City of Vaughan (pronounced von) is located in the York Region north of Toronto, Canada, and forms part of the Greater Toronto Area. Vaughan is comprised of five historic communities: Woodbridge, Maple, Thornhill, Concord and Kleinburg, with amalgamation and incorporation as a City occurring in 1991. With its proximity to Toronto, it is today one of Canada's fastest growing urban areas with an annual growth rate of 9.3%, and is considered one of the more affluent municipalities in the region.



While slightly south of Ontario's 'snow belt', Vaughan does receive its share of severe winter weather. The city averages 30 cm (12 in) of snow per month during the peak winter period (Dec to Feb), but has recorded several months with snowfall over 80 cm (31 in). Strong winds (drifting snow) and freezing rain also play havoc with the region's winter roads.

Dealing with all of this winter is the job of Vaughan's Public Works Department, one of the City's larger departments, which employs over 250 people, including contract workers. The Department relies on a fleet of 134 vehicles, which include snow plows, salt spreaders, windrow plows, loaders and dump trucks. The City also operates 35 smaller sidewalk plows.

To serve its constituents, the City of Vaughan operates an in-house customer call centre, staffed by eight people. A large number of the calls received are public works related, and these typically increase with bad winter weather as area residents inquire about the condition of roads, streets and sidewalks.



The Challenge: How Could GPS Data Improve Customer Service?

Vaughan became an InterFleet customer in 2001 with the installation of 80 remote vehicle management GPS devices in the City's snow plows, and the implementation of the InterFleet software solution. It was the City's first experience with GPS vehicle tracking.

Vaughan's initial focus with InterFleet was its snow plows because they wanted to begin closely monitoring their winter plowing and salting operations, as well as the performance of their contractors, who comprise the majority of the snowplow fleet. As with most northern cities, winter maintenance is considered one of the more critical roles of their public works departments, as well as being one of the larger, single and ongoing, budget items in their yearly budgets, which can often balloon in years of above average snowfall.

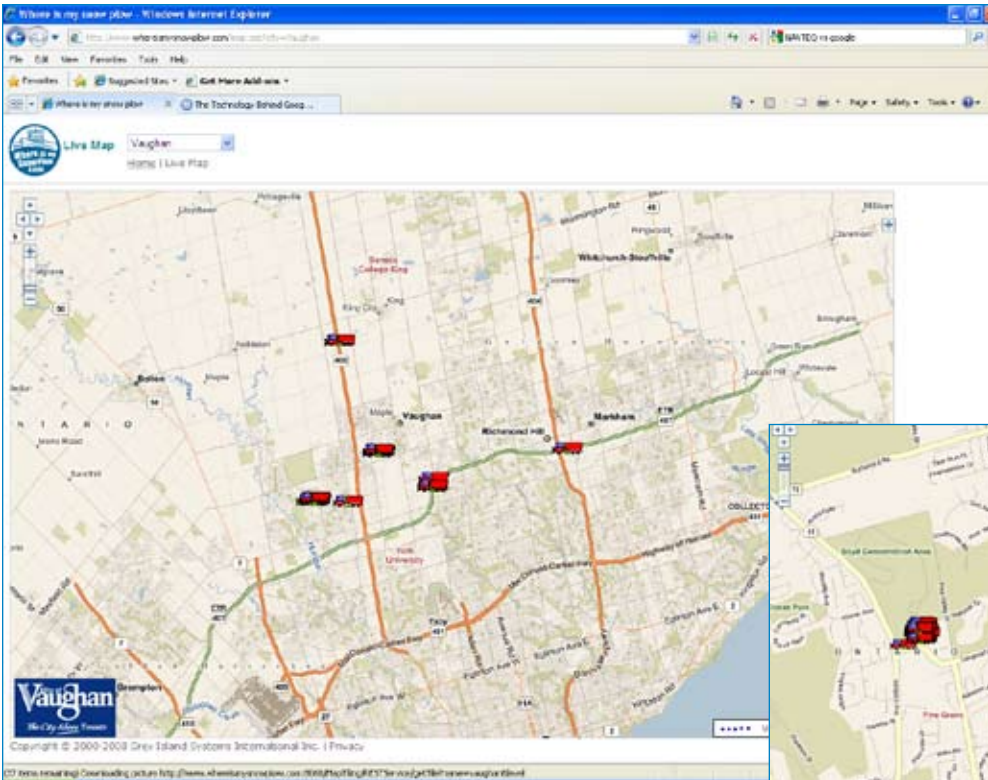
The InterFleet solution met all of the City's needs and now all 134 of Vaughan's snow plows have been equipped with GPS devices, as well as an additional 135 vehicles of all types used by other departments such as Solid Waste Management, Bylaw Enforcement and Parks.

InterFleet provides Vaughan, and other cities, with real-time location-based services and telematics capabilities to help effectively manage their vehicles and drivers. Highly detailed and accurate location mapping accessed on a web browser, as well as information available through detailed reports, provide the tools for more efficient: dispatching, route optimization, maintenance, and

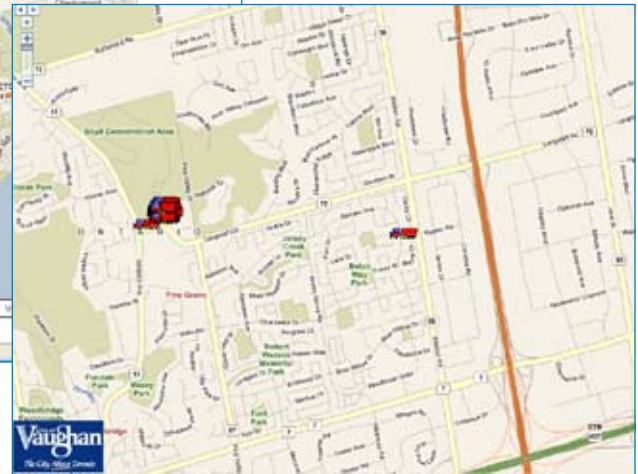
workforce management. According to Shawn McKenzie, Sr. Environmental & Technical Assistant, Vaughan Public Works Department, "We've found that the information InterFleet provides is vital in our response to residents' concerns, City Council's accountability, and managing our contractors and their delivery of service."

Given the Department's success using InterFleet to manage its fleet, City Council and the City's call centre asked if they could have access to the InterFleet web portal to immediately address the calls they were receiving from residents inquiring about the status of winter snow removal. Until then, call centre personnel would receive a snow plowing enquiry, then contact the Public Works Department for snow plow location information, and then make a return call to provide that information to the caller. As this was time consuming, it was far easier for call centre staff to simply fall back on the City's operating policy that streets would be cleared within 16 hrs after snowfall had ceased. This did little to address residents' concerns and gave the impression that the Department didn't know the location of their plows or when they would arrive in a particular area – which couldn't have been further from the truth since InterFleet was providing this detail to fleet managers.

Giving call centre personnel access to the full InterFleet portal, however, wasn't practical as the vast majority of its content was of little relevance to the type of inquiries the call centre was fielding. Additionally, while this might give call centre staff a tool to answer questions more



The Where is My Snowplow webpage with zoomed view showing location of snow plows



quickly and effectively, it would do very little to reduce the number of calls. This begged the question: how could the City simplify this information and make it available to call centre staff or ideally, directly to the public? The City posed the question to InterFleet and the response was immediate – “Where is my Snowplow.”

The Solution: “Where is My Snow Plow”

InterFleet proposed the creation of a webpage that anyone could access from any web browser that would display a very simplified version of InterFleet’s real-time, vehicle location mapping function – the same information that the Department’s dispatchers and fleet managers were accessing on a daily basis. This stripped down display would show a vehicle’s location on an area map, but without the vehicle’s identity, direction of travel, speed, etc., as it was felt that this information, which can change minute-by-minute, could mislead visitors to the site.

According to Shawn McKenzie, “We found when talking to residents and our call centre people that what people really wanted was simply the reassurance that our plows were out there working, that they’d be making their way to their area soon, and to have that information quickly.”

The result was whereismysnowplow.com, a webpage that is accessible through a link on the City of Vaughan’s website. The single-page webpage is fast, very easy to navigate and requires no special knowledge to use.

It was launched in 2008, and publicized on the City’s website, articles in its bi-annual Public Works Newsletter, a calendar, and by City staff directing the public to the site at every opportunity.

The result has been a substantial reduction in the number and frequency of calls to the City’s call centre and inquiries to councillors and staff. Now call centre staff point callers to the website when they receive snow plow related calls in an attempt to reduce future calls, and the results have been positive as website visits increase year over year. “While no detailed studies have been done yet, everyone agrees that call volumes have diminished since the website was implemented, and this is especially noticeable after a winter weather event,” says Shawn McKenzie.

“The ‘Where is My Snowplow’ website has dramatically decreased the number of calls coming in to our call centre.”

Shawn McKenzie
Sr. Environmental & Technical Assistant
City of Vaughan Public Works Dept.

McKenzie added that a somewhat unexpected benefit has been the greater degree of transparency and higher profile that the Department’s winter maintenance activities now enjoy, and a sense of accountability for City councillors, workers and contractors. “When you know that anyone has access to this information, it improves

accountability since you know your work is being watched and measured directly by the public. This has certainly been the case with our contractors.”

The Future: Greater Access to Information for City Residents

Vaughan’s success with InterFleet and “Where is My Snow Plow”, means that the City plans to expand its use of vehicle location and telematics applications in the future. One such application being considered is the City’s fleet of 35 sidewalk snow plows. Similar to street plowing operations, the call centre receives many calls regarding sidewalk clearing, particularly from residents dealing with personal mobility issues. The City’s sidewalk fleet could be incorporated into the “Where is My Snow Plow” website in the near future.

Like all cities using InterFleet technology, Vaughan may one day see further value in providing fleet operations data directly to residents to reduce the resources required to deal with resident inquiries and improve the overall delivery of services to its constituents. One such area could be waste and recycling collection, where, like snow plowing, residents are depending on city vehicles for the delivery of essential and ongoing services.

Vaughan’s “Where is My Snow Plow” application was the first of its kind in North America, and has since been implemented by the municipalities of Port Hope, Ontario and Trois Rivieres, Quebec. Though more recent, both have begun seeing similar results.



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