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Risk Management: Sledding and Tobogganing Hills

Many may remember the iconic sledding scene from the National Lampoon's movie, *Christmas Vacation*, where the character Clark Griswold (played by actor Chevy Chase) is eager to try his newly waxed sled. The sled ultimately sends him rocketing out of control down the hill, through the woods, across a busy highway, and eventually crashing into a Walmart. Although very comical in a movie, it depicts real dangers that are present at many tobogganing hills.

Choose a Location

With most of the province covered in a heavy blanket of snow and access to indoor recreational facilities limited during the pandemic, many residents are looking to utilize municipal parks and hills for outdoor recreation. Often, residents simply pick the tallest hill in their municipality to use for what they see as the most exhilarating place to sled, though they may be unaware of the dangers.

When possible, the municipality should designate hills where sledding is permissible. This allows municipal staff to prepare the hills before the snow comes, ensuring they can remove any obstacles that may cause injury. Hills should be free of debris, rocks, branches, posts, fences, and trees, as well as offer a long landing spot at the bottom of the hill that does not lead to a road or a body of water. Supervisors can also designate where the sledders can start from to ensure that excessive speed will not cause the sledders to lose control and strike obstacles or other sledders.

Informing the public of where the designated hills are located through social media, municipal website, newspaper, radio, or television is also recommended to ensure that they are well known.

Other considerations when designating hills are accessibility and parking. Ample parking is important to ensure that neighbouring properties are not encroached upon and can mitigate inherent dangers of pedestrians and vehicles. The hill should also be easily accessible by emergency services.

It is important to note that if it becomes known that people are using other hills than ones that were designated, a duty of care is still owed to ensure their safety. As per the [Occupiers Liability Act](#), a duty of care is owed to all who may enter a property, even trespassers. There is also an increased duty of care owed to minors. When these areas have been identified, similar protocols as utilized at designated hills should be enacted for inspection, maintenance, and signage.

Maintenance and Inspection

Creating policy around the maintenance and inspection of the hills is important to ensure that the premise is kept reasonably safe. The policy should dictate who is to perform the maintenance and inspection, and the frequency at which these tasks should be performed. It should be decided whether staff or volunteers will be doing the work, and those individuals should be trained accordingly. When inspecting the hill, remove all jumps, moguls, ice buildup, frost heaves, vandalism, and repair any signs of exposed turf. It is important to keep a detailed log of when the inspections are occurring and retain those records as they can be invaluable in defending negligence lawsuits that may be brought against the municipality should someone be injured at the hill. Inspection logs should contain (but are not limited to) the following:

- ◆ The date and time of inspection and maintenance

- ◆ The name of the staff member or volunteer who performed the inspection and maintenance
- ◆ The weather at the time of inspection (temperature, precipitation, etc.)
- ◆ Any important observations
- ◆ What maintenance was performed
- ◆ If maintenance was not performed at the time of the inspection, who was this reported to and when will it be followed up?

Signage

Clear and bright signage is important to inform users of the hill of any inherent dangers and provide clear rules involving its use. Signage should be posted in numerous locations around the hill and in the parking areas, with careful attention given to ensuring that signage is not posted where someone may collide with it while tobogganing.

Signage should include hours of operation, whether the hill is supervised or not, recommendations for helmet usage, and rules of conduct. The sign should contain information on where to locate the nearest phone, what number to call in an emergency, and contact information for the municipal department overseeing the hill to report hazards or incidents. In addition, the sign could include a QR code directing the participants to a website or PDF that lists an in-depth rules and contact details. Some municipalities have also added ways for people to report any issues, such as uploading photos or a pin where issues are located.

Additional Safety

Where possible, supervision of the hills is recommended. This should include staff or volunteers at the top and bottom of the hill to monitor safety, conduct, and ensure that there is adequate space between sledders to prevent collision. Supervisors should be trained on safe sledding practices and incident reporting. They should be screened with references and criminal background checks to ensure they do not pose a risk of abuse.

Education is a powerful tool in preventing injury. It is encouraged that the public be provided education and resources on the dangers of these activities, how to protect themselves, and the importance of helmets. There are many free resources available online that can provide tips on how to sled and toboggan safely, such as:

- ◆ [MyHealth.Alberta.ca – Sledding and tobogganing](https://myhealth.alberta.ca)
- ◆ [Canada Safety Council – Sled Safety 101](https://www.safetycouncil.ca)

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