

Melting away the hassle of shovelling

BY NICK PETTER

Gerry Lemieux never shovels his driveway, or the steps and walkway of his Toronto home. They are never ploughed or salted, but are always clear of ice.

Whenever snow starts to fall, sensors attached to his home automatically flip a switch that heats his pavement. It's just warm enough to melt each flake of snow as it lands.

"It's my favourite appliance," Mr. Lemieux said.

"I don't have piles of dirty black snow with sand and salt everywhere. And if I go away for the weekend, my driveway is clean and dry and safe when I come home."

As president of Britech Corp., a Toronto company that specializes in "amenities for the ultimate home," Mr. Lemieux's devotion to snow-melt systems, as they're called, may seem to be a special case.

But according to both city officials and private contractors, the technology that was once reserved for airport runways and parking-garage ramps is now becoming popular with up-market home owners.

Many are aging baby boomers who don't want to be outside in the cold for an hour exerting themselves, said Ray Mang, a colleague of Mr. Lemieux's at Britech.

"They don't want a coronary," he said.

Mr. Mang estimates that heating a 1,000-sq.-ft. driveway costs about \$2.50 an hour.

"So if it snows for five hours you're paying about \$13 to clear your driveway," he said. "You can't get a kid to come over and do it for that much."

To buy and install an electric heating system will cost at least \$5,500. Systems that instead use a network of underground pipes carrying hot water and antifreeze cost upward of \$20,000.

"It's perceived as being a luxury and very expensive. And frankly speaking, unless you're getting your driveway done anyway, it is," Mr. Mang said.

Steve Gilmore works for a company that installs the more expensive water systems, Belyea Bros. Ltd. He says people buying snow-melt driveways are the elderly and those who have a little extra money and who would otherwise hire land-



TIBOR KOLLEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Gerry Lemieux shows off a driveway that uses his company's equipment to melt snow and ice. The driveway in the foreground is not heated.

scapers to plow their driveways.

Seventy new homes in a development in Rosedale are equipped with the heated driveways.

As the popularity of the amenity increases, city officials have had to inform home owners that they may be illegally warming public land.

"A lot of times we find work is being done without the proper permits," said Angie Antoniou, a city manager who deals with issues of right of way. "We want to make sure

there's no conflict with public utilities."

Though there have been no accidents yet, she said there is a risk city workers could unknowingly cut into the heating pipes while working on other projects, spilling antifreeze into the ground.

Although the use of heated driveways may reduce the use of the toxic road salt that ends up in Toronto's rivers and creeks, some local environmental activists are worried by

both the risk of spills and the rate at which the electrical systems consume power. They can soak up as much as 70 per cent of the current in an average home.

"To be using electricity to heat the outdoors is odd," said Shelly Petrie, Executive Director of the Toronto Environmental Alliance.

"With record levels of smog in Toronto this past summer, and with looming climate-change scenarios, it is one of those luxury items that

really should be forgone," she said.

Mr. Lemieux argued the electric systems should not be singled out for criticism, and that they are actually more efficient than the water heaters that run on natural gas.

"If it weren't, you wouldn't see the major condominium corporations using electric heating cables for snow melting as a standard."

Though its popularity in Canada is new, pavement has been heated in Norway for more than 75 years.