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Deep trouble: Lax maintenance underlies a gaping pothole problem on Taos roads

By J.R. Logan

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For Jo Ann Obara, dodging potholes on the main thoroughfare through Taos is a lot like driving an obstacle course.

“You have to be really careful,” says Obara, who’s lived south of town since 1988. “I don’t remember Paseo [del Pueblo Sur] ever being as bad as it is this year.”

She might be right. Midwinter is usually peak time for potholes, but years of neglected road maintenance could be part of the reason road craters seem more prolific this season.

To drivers like Obara, potholes are more than a hassle. She suspects a pothole (or several) caused a cracked rim that recently cost her \$400 to replace. Local mechanics say the sorry state of roads across Taos County has drummed up plenty of business. Some potholes have caused enough damage to earn a reputation as bruisers.

“There was one on Blueberry Hill that was just money for months,” said mechanic Norbert Mondragon, owner of Taos Off-Road and Performance.

Mondragon says a solid thunk from a pothole normally knocks a car’s alignment out of whack or bends a wheel. But a real solid hit can snap an axle or even cause a wheel to fall off.

The anatomy of a pothole is pretty simple: Water seeps through cracks in the pavement to the sub base — the material directly under the road surface. When that water freezes, it expands and pushes the pavement up to form a hump. When the ice thaws, a void is left under the road. That weak spot disintegrates as it’s battered by passing traffic, exposing (voila!) a pothole.

Francisco “French” Espinoza, public works director for the town of Taos, doesn’t mince words when describing some of his department’s biggest headaches: He says Gusdorf Road is “screwed up bad,” Camino del Medio is “littered with potholes,” and the condition of the Plaza in the heart of downtown is “horrible.”

In the throes of winter, the fastest cure for a pothole is a dose of cold mix — a temporary filler that’s meant to last just until crews can do a proper patch in the spring or summer.

The town is poised to spend as much as \$21,000 this year on permanent pothole repairs. But Espinoza says these kinds of Band-Aids aren’t working anymore. And at about \$40 a square

yard, that money doesn't go very far. Pavement on some roads is so bad that even when a repair is done, new potholes just form around the patch.

Town and county road officials say trying to keep up with the damage this winter is like playing a game of potholeWhac-A-Mole — as soon as one gets filled, another one pops up.

Part of the problem seems to be a long lapse in regular maintenance that's starting to show in a big way.

"At one point, we had a pretty aggressive plan to oversee all the roadways with the idea of extending the life of the road," said Espinoza.

An analysis by Espinoza shows the town would set aside between \$200,000 and \$250,000 a year to keep roads in shape. Regular resurfacing would give the life of the road surface another six or seven years, Espinoza said.

But starting in 2008, the budget for road maintenance waned. As the recession worsened, it was one of the line items that was gutted down to almost nothing. In fact, between July 2011 and June 2013, there was literally no money spent on street repair and maintenance two years ago, and on most town roads. A few short sections of road got rebuilt in other years, but most town roads saw no love. Six years after the budget cuts began, it might not be surprising the town's roads are falling apart. Espinoza said some kind of maintenance needs to be revived.

"We really need to get this done because our roads are failing," Espinoza said.

A 1981 report entitled a "Pothole Primer" by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers predicted (even then) a surge in potholes nationwide. "The combined effect of decreasing road maintenance funds and increasing traffic growth will inevitably propel many communities into a severe pothole situation," the report reads. "A community should counteract this trend and start on a program of preventative maintenance."

The report later made clear that maintenance was key to heading off potholes before they form. "A policy of only repairing potholes ... is not a maintenance program," the report reads.

In some places, roads in bad shape have proven to be a liability.

In 2013, the city of Albuquerque was one of several defendants named in a lawsuit brought by a woman who hit a pothole while riding her bike and veered into the road. She was then hit by a car and severely injured.

The suit alleged that the city of Albuquerque "was negligent in that it failed to properly inspect, maintain, repair and/ or warn of the dangerous condition of the pothole and/or the roadway for the traveling public ..." The city settled for an undisclosed amount this year.

Potholes (and the dangers they posed to neighbor kids on bikes) were at the center of Town Councilor Fritz Hahn's campaign when he ran for office last March.

Hahn is now proposing a "summit" between local governments and public institutions like Holy Cross Hospital to discuss pressing needs in the community and try to identify funding. Hahn said such a meeting could be a precursor to an effort to increase taxes to pay for critical projects, including roads.

But Hahn was careful to say officials would have to show there are no other options before proposing a tax hike.

In the short-term, the town has committed to getting potholes patched as fast as possible. The town has a hotline (751-2024) as well as an email address (pothole@taosgov.com) for reporting potholes, and Espinoza says reported potholes will be fixed within 24 hours.

But there are very few reports. Espinoza said the hotline has gotten less than two dozens calls since it was created years ago, and town officials say the email address hasn't gotten a single pothole report since at least Oct. 1.

The onus of the pothole problem doesn't rest solely on the town government.

The responsibility for fixing a pothole depends on who owns the road. But to the average driver, the jurisdictional divisions might not be totally clear.

For instance, while Paseo del Pueblo runs the length of Taos, it's technically a state highway and the responsibility of the New Mexico Department of Transportation.

While the town roads are obviously in trouble, the condition of state roads might soon be pretty similar. The Department of Transportation says its annual needs statewide outweigh available money by about \$250 million every year. County residents say there are a few brutal potholes lurking on state roads, especially around Arroyo Seco.

Like the town, the state says it's doing what it can to take care of potholes as quickly as possible. But the limited budgets mean permanent repairs are lagging, and rough roads might become more common.

"In the long-term, we're probably going to see a lot more cracking and a lot more potholes," said Rick Padilla, head of maintenance for the New Mexico Department of Transportation.

State representative Roberto "Bobby" Gonzales, D-Taos, introduced a bill in the current legislative session to raise the state's gas tax from 17 cents to 22 cents over the next five years, and allow some of the increased revenue could be used for repairs and maintenance.

However, it's still not clear what the state's long-term solution will be.

Gonzales' bill failed to get out of committee last week. Another proposal would rely on bond sales to pay for road repairs.



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Cold mix settles in a recently filled pothole on Paseo del Pueblo Sur Monday (Feb. 9) as crews with the New Mexico Department of Transportation work their way north through the heart of Taos.



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A pothole on the edge of Camino del Medio forces drivers to veer into the lane of oncoming traffic as they round a corner on the southwest side of Taos.