



Cost of potholes in Oakland soars as funding erodes

By Sean Maher
Oakland Tribune

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Oakland streets, already among the most broken and heavily trafficked in the country, are in the midst of a slow but serious decline that hits the pocketbooks of the city, the state and every driver in town. It's hard to drive around downtown, Fruitvale or East Oakland and not hit any of a seemingly countless number of potholes.

The city's Public Works Agency recently completed its annual "Pothole Blitz," struggling to maintain the current road quality as record traffic loads tear up city pavement.

As streets deteriorate, they become increasingly vulnerable to water damage, and without maintenance the problem snowballs, officials said. At the same time, a proposal from the governor to cut state gas tax funding to cities could revoke most of what funding still exists to tackle the problem.

The problem

There are 2,300 lane miles of road in Oakland, according to the Public Works Agency, and about a third are rated in poor condition by city engineers.

The projected paving cycle for a typical Oakland

road is about 85 years, and getting worse, said Public Works Director Raul Godinez.

"It's not even asphalt at that point. At 50 years, you've got a gravel road," Godinez said.

"It's not that we have great roads or long-lasting paving materials; we just don't have money, with the cuts we've had to absorb," said Tawfic Halaby, pavement management supervisor for the Community and Economic Development Agency, or CEDA, which teams with Public Works and county, state and federal agencies to maintain Oakland roads.

Among Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposed moves to address the state's budget crisis is redirecting gas tax income that currently feeds city and county public works agencies to pay debt service on state highway bonds, a move Godinez said would cripple the city's ability to tackle the roads problem.

"We get about \$7.2 million a year for street maintenance; he's talking about taking away \$6 million of that," Godinez said. "It will completely decimate us."

Meanwhile, the costs involved in roadway investments have exploded, according to the national report "Rough Roads Ahead: Fix Them Now or Pay For It Later," released in May.

In the past five years alone, asphalt has increased in price by 70 percent, and concrete by 36 percent, the report found; steel has doubled, and diesel fuel, which is still used to operate most heavy construction vehicles, more than tripled.

A third factor has made the situation even worse.

"Oakland has some of the most heavily traveled

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roads in the country," said Frank Moretti, director of policy and research for The Road Information Program and a co-author of the report.

The pavement is further damaged by increased traffic. Much of this damage comes from large commercial trucks that play a major role in the transportation of goods to and from warehouses from the Port of Oakland and all over the city, Moretti said.

The fallout

The problem doesn't just hit government pocketbooks.

The average California driver will pay almost \$600 a year in additional vehicle operating costs, such as gas and auto repairs, attributable directly to driving over deteriorating streets, according to the "Rough Roads Ahead" report.

New Jersey is the only other state where these costs are as high. Lowest on that list is Georgia, where the average driver will pay \$44 in vehicle operating costs attributable to bad roads, according to the report.

These additional costs especially hit large vehicles, which are bigger investments than personal cars and trucks and cost more to maintain and drive, Moretti said.

"Any products being shipped are going to absorb the cost of the shipment, which means the more expensive it gets to transport any goods, the more expensive those goods will be to the consumer," Moretti said.

Several crucial city agencies also manage fleets that absorb extra damage and cost more to maintain as a result of rough streets: fire and police departments,

public transit agencies and hospitals all run vehicles across rocky Oakland pavement every day.

Fixing the problem

"Historically, in the city, our pavement philosophy has been very reactive," Halaby said. "In the course of past decades, when someone calls in to complain about a street, then the city would do something about it. Or you might see political pressure, council members trying to make their district look better, or community groups, or the Chronicle Watch, you name it. The response from the city would be to go fix that problem.

"That may sound like it makes sense. But over time, more and more streets deteriorate to where they're in poor condition," he said. "We spent the last 20 years fixing the worst streets and didn't keep good streets in good condition."

Over time, then, more and more streets end up in bad shape, costing exponentially more to maintain, and the budget to fix them has stayed the same or decreased, Halaby said. With no forward-thinking, the eventual collapse of the city's infrastructure becomes inevitable.

"Federal funding comes with performance targets for maintenance, and Oakland didn't quite make those," said Theresa Romell, a senior planner-analyst at the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the agency that funnels all state and federal transportation funds to Bay Area counties and cities.

"The City Council really has to budget funds for simple overlays and preventive maintenance; they have to tell the public this is important to do," Romell said.

Operating with a current annual roads budget of

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about \$7 million, none of which comes from local sources, the best Oakland can do is slow the rate at which its roads deteriorate, Halaby said.

"We would need to quadruple our budget for the next five years just to keep our pavement in its current condition," he said.

Continuing with a "worst-first" policy would result in about a 4 percent overall drop in quality over the next five years, Halaby said. A best-first policy would cut that rate of decline roughly in half.

His staunch-the-bleeding proposal is a mixture of the two approaches, he said.

Meanwhile, the Public Works Agency is working to find partners in the struggle, spokeswoman Christine Schaff said.

"We have the pothole hot line at 510-615-5566, and we've had great partnerships with Caltrans, working on getting state funding from them, and EBMUD (East Bay Municipal Utility District)," Schaff said. "Other organizations who work on or under city streets, such as PG&E, we've tried making deals with them: You do the first layer of repairs, we'll do the second. We have more of those partnerships than we used to."

The challenge

Though engineers consider the best-first approach to street repairs to be a sound investment, and perhaps the only way out of the problem, it remains a tough sell in a city where many residents struggling to make ends meet have to live on streets plagued with potholes, eroding pavement.

"If I lived on a wrecked street and I saw them putting slurry seal over a street that looks perfectly good, I'd be outraged," said Bruce Williams, a senior

transportation planner with the Community and Economic Development Agency.

"We just have to help people understand why this is the only way it will work," he added.

The city expects to see about \$7 million in one-time funding from the federal stimulus package, which must go to maintain major thoroughfares like MacArthur and International boulevards. At the same time, however, millions in funding from various California state sources appear to be drying up, Halaby and Williams both said.

"We've done very well through the state until now," Williams said. "But looking forward, there's not going to be a lot coming through at the state level. At the moment, our best bet is the feds."

The Surface Transportation Reauthorization Bill is among the largest federal sources of income. It is currently going through negotiations in the House of Representatives, Williams said.

Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Oakland) submitted a list of about \$450 million in funding requests for that bill. Of that, \$300 million is for purchasing and deploying new BART rail cars; about \$5 million is expressly for roadway rehabilitation.

The same problem faces cities across the country, according to the "Rough Roads Ahead" report. Author Moretti said the only visible solution is to keep the public informed.

"Denial is not a long-term policy," Moretti said. "Look, the pavement's getting old, costs are going up, and local revenues are going down. These are all obviously happening at the same time, and it's a bit of a perfect storm. Agencies are always looking for cheaper, quicker, easier, but at the end of the day you've got to plan with the resources you have

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and figure out what additional resources it's going to take. People see through their windshields every day the level of their roads."

Neither MTC nor city engineers said they see any way out that doesn't involve a big boost in funding; without it, they say, Oakland residents will have to tolerate the condition of their streets and the slow overall crumbling of the city's roadway system.

Godinez agreed, citing the city audits recommendation for about \$30 million a year in funding for capital resurfacing and almost \$9 million a year for slurry seal maintenance.

Moretti suggested a use tax for drivers, perhaps targeted at the Port of Oakland, which draws many of the heaviest, most damaging vehicles.

According to Schaff, the Public Works Agency has made no recent push for such a tax, but plans to push for new fees for developers.

"One of the recommendations from the city's audit was that we find a way to collect a 'development impact fee,'" Schaff said. "That would be more for capital funding, for things like major repairs, and not just maintenance. That will be one of the recommendations we work on first, as soon as we get done with the budget process."

Romell expressed skepticism that any new taxes or fees would be approved, citing state voters' rejection in May of ballot initiatives that would have funded several public institutions more popularly recognized than the battered roads.

"When politicians are able to get more funding from the taxpayers, it's never a maintenance issue; it's pretty much always to build something new. It's political, but it's not very responsible," Romell said. "But just like the private sector manages their assets,

we need to do that same. "... You need to keep your house in good condition. You need to make sure it's not falling down before you're out shopping for curtains."

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