

Potholes

A bumpy nightmare for winter motorists

By Joanne Maliszewski
staff writer

Potholes seem to have replaced the weather as a favorite complaint.

Sit in any coffee shop, stand in a grocery checkout lane, wait in an auto repair shop and talk will eventually turn to this winter's potholes.

Everywhere motorists can be heard complaining that the dips, holes and cracks of the area's roads are worse than last year.

And in some cases they are. "We're getting some of the biggest, deepest ones I have ever seen," said Dennis Pagot, Oakland County Road Commission spokesman. "Yes, they do seem worse this year."

But remember when complaining about potholes on the roads to keep clear the distinction between county and local roads in the Farmington and Farmington Hills area.

Local officials say local roads, those under the jurisdiction of the cities of Farmington and Farmington Hills, are no better or worse than in previous years.

"It's my own valuation. But I don't think they are any worse than in previous years," said Earl Billings, Farmington Department of Public Works director.

The same reply is offered in Farmington Hills where most of the well-traveled roads are under Oakland County jurisdiction.

"In the long run, it is probably very similar to past years even though this thaw has been very bad," said David Call, Farmington Hills engineer.

Actually it's the quickly changing weather in the last couple of months that makes the potholes so obvious and bothersome.

AFTER DAYS OF rain at the end of December followed by an ice storm on New Year's, water already in the cracks of roads froze as well as softened the road's base. Because water expands when it freezes, the road begins to crack further, Pagot said. With the recent quick thaw, the roads began crumbling around the cracks, he said.

"As long as there are cracks (in the roads) there will be potholes," Pagot said.

What makes the whole mess even more noticeable is that the thaw this winter arrived about a month earlier than usual, said Tom Blasell, Farmington Hills Department of Public Services director.

Because many of the well-traveled

roads in Farmington Hills are county roads — Farmington, Orchard Lake, Middlebelt, Haggerty, 12 Mile — much of the concern about potholes centers on the city's gravel and subdivision roads.

On the other hand, most of Farmington's 35 miles of roads are paved and under the city's jurisdiction. Portions of Orchard Lake and Farmington roads are under the county's jurisdiction.

"Being small, we're able to do a little better job than the larger places," Billings said. But roads which are in good shape to begin with have fewer problems with potholes when winter comes, he added.

That's the problem Oakland County is facing, Pagot said.

Because funding over the last few years "has not been sufficient" to keep up with the repair and maintenance needs of the county roads, many of them are in less than "ideal" shape, Pagot said.

FARMINGTON Road, especially north of 12 Mile, is probably the most notorious for potholes in the Farmington area. But as a county road, it's up to the county to do the repairs. The

road, however, is targeted for major repairs this spring and early summer, according to Blasell.

In fact, residents in the subdivisions along the thoroughfare say they often hear the clang of a hubcap after an unfortunate motorist hits one of the many potholes on Farmington Road.

While each jurisdiction is having its own problems with potholes, both the cities and the county road crews have spent the winter trying to fill up as many as they can.

"We've been patching potholes all winter," Pagot said, adding that the county spends about \$1.8 million annually on patching the roads.

"It's very hard to keep up with it. We try to get the worse ones first," Pagot continued, adding that many residents call to let road officials know exactly where the most bothersome potholes are located.

Work crews in Farmington and Farmington Hills are usually out every day repairing the holes in the roads. And like the county, local road crews try to fix the worst of the bunch.

As far as the gravel roads, such as

Drake in Farmington Hills though, a fix-up will have to wait until spring or when the grounds thaw a bit so the road can be filled in and graded, Call said.

ALTHOUGH DRIVERS and their passengers can be seen cringing as the edge of a front tire clips a pothole, area repair shops are reporting few, if any, repairs due to pothole damage. The American Automobile Association (AAA) in Dearborn is reporting few insurance claims due to pothole damage.

In January overall insurance claims through AAA are up about 8 percent over January 1984, according to Jerry Cheskey, AAA spokesman. But most of the claims, he said, are not for auto damage caused by potholes. In fact, he said, most of the damage from potholes is so minor that it isn't covered by insurance.

Managers and workers at some of the area's repair shops also say they have yet to make any repairs for damage due to potholes.

But that in no way is an indication that autos aren't being damaged when they hit a pothole.

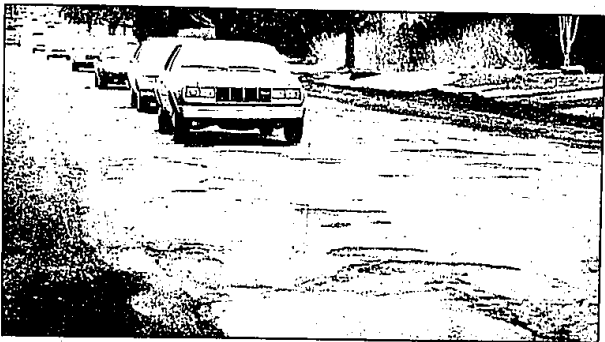


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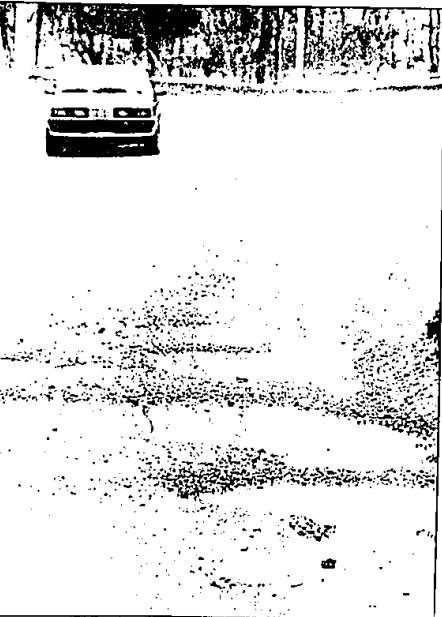
It's a busy time of the year for road repair crews. These two trucks are smoothing out Power road in Farmington Hills.



The spring thaw, accompanied by heavy rains, made driving hazardous and slowed down repair efforts.



Rain and rising temperatures have accelerated the deterioration of this stretch of Farmington Road between 12 and 13 Mile.



It's a tight squeeze for drivers negotiating this series of holes along Drake Road in Farmington Hills. The heavy rains last weekend were especially damaging to dirt and gravel roads.

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