

Hot seat He fields complaints on county roads

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

When he drives to work, Michael Richardson knows exactly what kind of day to expect.

If roads are bad, he'll be swamped with calls. If not, things could be a bit quieter.

But there's never a slow day this time of the year for the man who handles Oakland County road complaints.

"People use the roads every day," explained Richardson, who directs Oakland County Road Commission's Department of Citizen Services.

"When something affects you daily, you complain when there's a problem."



Michael Richardson never hangs up

SET UP IN 1973 after one of the county's worst spring breakups, the Department of Citizen Services handled 5,736 complaints in 1974.

Last year 12,794 calls came in about rough road conditions, traffic signals, drainage problems and construction.

But with 9,462 complaints by the end of March, this year will probably top the 1982 record of 14,990 calls. One big reason was the January ice storm which took its toll on the roads.

"This year will probably beat that easy. We're on our way," said Richardson, who received 400 calls Feb. 3 alone.

"We just haven't had any slack time at all."

"People here are aware of liability problems," said Richardson, adding that improper road design is a popular claim today.

WITH OAKLAND County Road Commission since 1978 when he was an engineering student, Richardson was in the traffic department before he and another employee started the Office of Public Assistance.

In 1979 it was expanded to four people and became the Department of Citizen Services.

"We were just getting more complaints," said Richardson, whose calls vary with the seasons. Thaws after bad winter storms lead to spring breakups and potholes. Then the drainage complaints start rolling in.

Because complaints are centralized, records are able to be kept on problems and roads which are particularly troublesome.

Resident input led the Road Commission to change from cold patches on potholes to a material called Sylvar, which sticks better.

Future plans include using a centralized computer system to keep better histories and retrieve information faster.

WHILE SITTING in one of the hottest seats in the county, Richardson takes pride in never having hung up the phone on a caller.

"The majority treat us real well," said the Waterford resident, admitting

there are some callers who "want your job."

His solution is to listen to the complaint and try to defuse it, if possible.

"I let them get it out, not throw fuel on it," said Richardson, who tries to explain whenever possible why the road problem is there.

"I try to get in there and tell them some of our problems."

He said it's hard to tell who will call with a "thank you."

"Sometimes you really work hard to resolve a problem and don't hear a thing," he said. "Then you do something very simple and they call your boss to sing your praises. It's nice to hear."

HE AND CO-WORKER Fred Rudd act as liaisons between residents and the six Road Commission garages throughout the county.

Whenever possible, they do field reviews to check out a site. "It gives you a better perspective than just sitting here," said Richardson, who is based in Waterford.

Also answering phone calls are Deborah Mathews and Karen McDonald.

Complaint Coordinator Fred Rudd admits it's tough to tell someone stuck in the snow in a subdivision that main roads must be plowed first.

"To them, their problem is the most important one," he explained.

"If people just knew the whole scope and magnitude of Oakland County. There are an awful lot of people and an awful lot of concerns."

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