

State of roads dig deep hole in South Tahoe



Even though some roads in South Lake got repaired this summer, most make for a bumpy ride.Â Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Susan Wood

Forget that time heals all wounds. With respect to South Lake Tahoe roads, time is the enemy â€œ one the City Council has grappled with for more than eight years.

While the debate over how to fund street repair continued in council chambers last month, the network of 130 miles of roads has disintegrated to a level where city engineers believe 65 percent of the streets will need to be reconstructed by 2024. City staff is basing its estimate on a pavement management study conducted by a consultant two years ago that painted anything but a rosy picture of the public works program.

By next year, almost 40 percent of the roads are projected to be rated in â€œpoorâ€ condition. Airport Road is one of

those. Under an elaborate rating system, the consultant estimated the network would bump two-thirds of the roads in the "every poor" category in the next 14 years.

Less than a quarter of city streets are considered "fair," "good" or "every good."

Even though most city officials agree the streets need to be overlaid or patched, the amount of money earmarked for the program remains in jeopardy every year.

The \$1 million allocated for street overlay in this budget year was slashed by more than half as a result of an unprecedented economic downturn. This wasn't the only year the roads took a back seat in the budget. No budget was allocated in 2001, 2004 and 2005.

According to a staff report, the cost of asphalt has skyrocketed by 130 percent from \$37 per ton to \$85. Asphalt is oil-based, contingent on the volatile price of a barrel of oil in world markets.

City Engineer Jim Marino said staff is looking into using a new rubberized chip seal next year. The seal is a mix of oil and crushed rock. Crews would cover the surface twice with the hope ultraviolet exposure and snow removal equipment don't break down the double layer.

"With limited funding, we should be focusing on keeping our good roads in good shape in order to extend lifespan," Marino said.

Adding to the problem is Sacramento. The state temporarily crawled out of its budget quagmire to patch its funding holes. In doing so, it is still considering taking back California's gas tax money of 18 cents a gallon local governments have come to rely on.

Public Works Director John Greenhut has called his task of

developing a budget for his department "challenging." The city's fiscal year begins Oct. 1.

But the cry of being poor doesn't sit well with locals. Motorists and residents like Evan Williams have complained to the city in recent years about the state of Venice Drive. The popular Tahoe Keys thoroughfare where Williams lives delivers a bone-jarring experience in a vehicle and bicycle trying to negotiate 3- to 5-inch-wide cracks that cover the Keys water lines.

"Every time any vehicle of weight goes by (over the cracks) the whole house shakes," Williams said. "The city has some culpability of maintaining our roads."

But Public Works contends simply patching these cracks won't work because the original asphalt failed to bind adequately enough to handle the wide temperature variances this region experiences. To fix the expanding and contracting of cracks on Venice the city would need to go in and grind out the problem areas before filling in.

Mayor Jerry Birdwell has asked the Public Works department for a list of streets in need of repair. He wants to find one-time funds to fill the holes that pop up every year.

At an August council meeting, Councilman Bill Crawford suggested the city Budget and Finance Committee reduce the general fund reserve earmarked for emergencies be reduced from 25 percent to 15 to help "get serious about public works."

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