

S. Tahoe roads a jarring ride with no cash to fix them

By Kathryn Reed

Sitting water is asphalt's nemesis. Water erodes the road surface, potholes develop, and then the edges start chipping away to make an even bigger hole. It's a cycle that is repeated each winter in Lake Tahoe.

With an unseasonably warm January and no white stuff in sight for the next week, snow is in a constant state of thaw in the basin.

South Lake Tahoe road crews drive around with bags of all-weather mix to fill in potholes they see or ones that have been reported to them. But this is just a temporary solution.



Venice Drive in South Lake Tahoe practically requires a mountain bike or four-wheel drive.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

Summer, when the temperatures allow for it, is when a more

permanent fix to the problem can be applied.

John Greenhut, South Lake Tahoe Public Works director, said each winter some of the same areas develop potholes because water accumulates and has nowhere to go.

“We don’t have proper drainage,” Greenhut said of the city’s streets.

The city has a master drainage plan and a master erosion control plan, some of which overlaps, but funding is a constant barrier to make all corrective measures. Plus, snow precludes work from being done on a year-round basis.

City council after city council has heard presentation after presentation regarding the state of disrepair of South Lake Tahoe’s roads. The current council was told last month it would cost about \$312 million for the city to have a complete streets infrastructure.

“Complete streets” is a term meaning a street will have drainage, curbs and gutters, bike trails, sidewalks, lights – and a street without potholes or the need for four-wheel drive on dry surfaces.

“Most pavement on city streets, it’s a layer of pavement, maybe an overlay on native soil. Old oils that were used shrink up and you get cracks,” explained Stan Hill, chief engineer with the city. “As we move through projects, we would like to rebuild to a higher standard. Assuming we have the money, they would be better engineered, have a thicker substance and would last longer.”

South Tahoe, like most cities, has three classifications for roads – arterial, collector and local. Examples of arterials are Pioneer Trail, Al Tahoe and Tahoe Keys; collectors are Venice, Lakeview and Blackwood; locals are Kubel, Armstrong and Alameda.

Even though the city knows what needs to be done, the dollars aren't sufficient to correct the problem.

In the report presented to the council last month the same funding analysis from March 2010 was brought forward.

Primary sources include: grants in aid, increasing the transient occupancy tax, increasing the sales tax, creating an assessment district, and creating a parcel tax. Supplemental sources of money include: inspection and license fees, storm water discharge fees, redevelopment tax increment, gross vehicle weight fees, street cut fees, parking fees, TRPA mitigation funds, and development fees.

Jim Marino, engineer with the city, told the council his department applied for federal stimulus dollars but was denied because the government was looking to fund larger projects.

"There is not much federal or state money to rebuild streets," Marino said.

Marino recognizes as the city attempts to create complete streets "sidewalks are only as good as when they are dry. Many out there now are not usable."

He wants the city to get creative with creating a funding source for roads. He mentioned how South Tahoe Refuse does not pay a fee to drive its trucks on the city streets that were not designed to handle that weight. He pointed to Truckee, which has a percentage of sales tax dollars and parking fees going toward its streets.

With grants the city goes after, most come with strings – at least in terms of requiring matching dollars the city may not have.

"We need to hold developers accountable for improvements around their projects," Marino added.

In 2009, the estimate, according to Marino, was it would take

\$5.2 million a year for 25 to 30 years to get the streets up to par.

“We need to get a funding source in place,” Marino said.

City Manager Tony O’Rourke has floated the idea of a general obligation bond to repair roads.

At the City Council’s strategic planning session improving infrastructure was one of the goals. In the coming weeks it’s expected the council will begin to set specific goals. The next council meeting is Feb. 8 at 9am at Lake Tahoe Airport.