

POTHOLE MATING SEASON IN COLUMBIA COUNTY

Story & photos: RANDY SANDERS

Western Oregon's long rainy season has a punishing effect on its city streets and rural roadways. The constant down pour of rain plays havoc on asphalt overlays, loosening rock like a tiny hammer chipping away at streets. Roads also endure the normal wear and tear of traffic abuse and the periodic ice and snow storms. For Oregon counties tasked with staying within their budgets, road maintenance becomes a struggle.



But despite the occasional big projects like bridges, overlays and overpasses, potholes are a meat and potatoes issue for road departments in the town and the country. From bustling city streets, to rural county roads -- even with the most ardent of technical advances in modern times -- potholes are an irritating and expensive problem.

“Pothole mating season,” Tristan Wood says to me, with a wry smile. “That’s what we call it around here during the spring. After a long, rainy Oregon winter, it’s as if they reproduce.” February and March are good months for the road crew to do the bulk of pothole maintenance. Then again, May through June is another period when more asphalt gets shoveled. Despite two of the busiest periods of the year, potholes are actually being maintained all year long. There’s even a special blend called “cold mix.” This unique asphalt cocktail is designed to perform best during the winter months because of its durability.

Tristan Wood is the Engineering Project Coordinator for Columbia County’s stellar Road Department. A serious and consummate professional, he’s friendly and outgoing. If Tristan were an NBA basketball player, he might be a three-point specialist; considering the almost \$3 million grant he just scored for Columbia County from the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) for the first phase of a three-phase project. These improvements -- paid for by the federal government and funneled through ODOT -- will provide the much needed bicycle and

pedestrian amenities from Highway 30 to Columbia Avenue. This project will also improve safety for kids walking and biking to St. Helens High School and McBride Elementary. But even as a Project Manager for such an impressive job, Tristan keeps his eye on other responsibilities within the Road Department that citizens deem important; potholes.

“Yes, it is a priority,” Tristan Wood contends. “Our heaviest repairs usually happen in early spring and summer. Most people are very understanding and they know that we’re doing the best we can. I would say about 98% of everyone who makes a pothole complaint is pretty understanding.”

David Hill is Columbia County’s Public Works Director. It’s his job to stretch an exhausted budget, making sure that concerns are met including the pothole problem. While funds continue to dry up, expectations don’t.



Tristan Wood (left) and David Hill

photo: RANDY SANDERS

Rising fuel prices makes asphalt a commodity. Asphalt comes from one of two Portland locations and if there are spikes in fuel prices, it becomes difficult to arrive at solid numbers when purchasing.

“It’s a challenge because many variables go into the price of repairing potholes,” admits David. “The asphalt comes from Portland and so any spike in gas prices can affect the price of asphalt.”

Citizens traveling to and from work each day are focused on the long commute and making ends meet for their families. They don’t make it their business to care about knowing the economics of asphalt, they just want that huge pothole -- awaiting them near their home on their commute each day -- filled. Like many other Oregon counties, Columbia County’s road crew has also fell victim to budget restraints. Currently, there are a total of just 13 workers spread out in each town: four in Rainier, three in Clatskanie, two in Vernonia and four in St. Helens /Scappoose. With a total of 542 miles of roadway -- 215 miles of asphalt, 171 miles of gravel and 156 miles of asphaltic oil matte -- it averages out to each crew member responsible for almost 42 miles of road. The crews patch roads all year long using a special winter mix for the low temperatures and are on call 24 hours a day for emergencies. They also stripe roads, cut brush, plow snow, do sign maintenance, grade gravel roads, as well as do paving and bridge maintenance. In addition to roads, the department is responsible for all County parks. They have five administrative and three equipment maintenance employees as well. The road crew has dealt with budget furloughs, reduced staff and has lost 3 employees within the past three years.

“When people retire, we just haven’t replaced them,” David Hill confides. “It’s a way to deal with the budget.”

Besides the big ODOT grant, there's other good news for Columbia County's Roads. Periodically, state funds are made available for road use by ODOT. Hill announces that this summer his crew will be utilizing all of those funds.

"We'll be moving more asphalt this summer than in the past six years in Columbia County. Citizens should expect to see not just potholes being repaired, but huge sections of the road redone. That means we'll be paving 600 to 800-foot sections."

There are often times when folks who live farther away from Highway 30 may feel as though they've been forgotten. Perhaps they've bounced over one particular pothole for much too long and wonder if they had lived closer to the city, their complaint might be filled faster.

"We try and answer every pothole concern. It's important that we maintain great customer service for everyone equally within the County. We fill the largest and most serious potholes first," says Tristan Wood. "Those that are dangerous or causing tire damage, are the highest priority."

In fact, it's not uncommon to see David Hill and Tristan Wood shut down their computers, change into their work clothes, climb on board the next truck leaving the yard loaded with asphalt, grab a shovel and together with the rest of the crew, start slinging asphalt.

"When we have a heavy workload, we all help out. Everyone grabs a shovel," Tristan says matter-of-factly. "We just want to make certain the job gets done."

To stay informed of where the Columbia County Road Crew will be paving, "like" us on Facebook.

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