

County, state patch up after cold weather



A Wilson County Road Commission crew works to fill a pothole on Long Oak Road in Gladeville on Tuesday afternoon. Pictured are (from left) Bryan Graves, Gary Heird and Glenn Coggins.

Barely 1 month into winter, officials await more freezing temps

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During cold weather, many are concerned about the water freezing on top of pavement, paying little, if any, attention to trouble forming underneath — things such as potholes.

The Wilson County Road Commission has been fielding numerous calls concerning potholes in the area over the past few weeks. With more than 850 miles of roadways (one-way), Wilson County Road Superin-

tendent Steve Murphy said that it's unrealistic for the commission to be able to find every pothole on its own, so it relies on reports from residents.

"People usually call the office," said Murphy. "I got guys out checking roads, but a lot of it is word of mouth from people calling in. That's what we want them to do though, because as long as we get a



Steve Murphy

record of it, we can get out to fix it."

Wilson County gets asphalt from Vulcan Properties. If temperatures remain warmer than freezing, the asphalt can stay warm long enough to get to its destination. Murphy mentioned that each load averages about 3-4 tons, and if it stays in a pile, it will keep relatively warm.

After a few hours, howev-

er, the hot asphalt starts to form an exterior crust, and it becomes harder to work with. That timeframe creates an issue when reported potholes are scattered across many miles.

"Typically, with three tons of asphalt, you can do several holes," said Murphy. "However, we have to go so far out in the county that sometimes, you go 20 miles to fix one hole, and

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then come back 20 miles to fix another one."

The asphalt's effectiveness is also correlated to the temperature of the ground. The hotter the ground is, Murphy explained, the better the new mix bonds with the mix that's already there.

The Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) announced this week that it was kicking efforts to patch potholes created by the fluctuating temperatures into overdrive.

The department has a page on its website with information about potholes and what causes them.

Potholes are created when moisture seeps into the soil beneath the road surface. When the moisture freezes, it causes the ground to expand and push the pavement up. As the temperatures rise, the

ground returns to normal level, but the pavement often remains raised, which creates a gap between the pavement and the ground beneath it. When a vehicle drives over the gap, the pavement surface cracks and falls in the hollow space, leading to the formation of a pothole.

Unfortunately, that page also bears an ominous forecast for the roadways in the no-so-distant future.

Typically, spring temperatures warm cold pavement, melting and evaporating any ice. That process creates air pockets, which can eventually cause the pavement to break up. A winter of heavy snow or rain and several freeze-thaw cycles can mean a big pothole season ahead.

Barely a month into the winter season, Wilson County has already been hit by three snow storms. That results in a lot of water on the roadways. Murphy is also weary of imminent potholes. He

called the situation "inevitable," but added that it's something the county prepares for.

"That's just a maintenance thing when you have man-made asphalt," Murphy said. "But that's what we do and what we know. We're going to keep them maintained."

TDOT's announcement indicated that as weather permits, it will also have multiple crews out patching potholes during the weeks ahead. Cold-mix asphalt is currently being used for repairs. However, asphalt plants may open during the day and allow crews to use hot mix for more permanent repairs in some areas.

In its release, TDOT warned that it may be spring or early summer before more permanent repairs are made throughout the state.

"(Additionally), full-scale paving may be necessary to repair more severe locations," Murphy said. "Dedicated crews will be assigned to

interstates, while smaller groups will focus on state routes."

Pothole data is sparse because TDOT does not count individual potholes, nor does it keep a tally of how many potholes have been repaired, so it's difficult to determine the cost of repairs per pothole.

The department considers these repairs as part of normal highway maintenance operations, and therefore, it budgets for pothole repairs.

Despite the uptick in cold-weather systems, TDOT has spent about half of what it had on pothole patching during the previous three years. There was \$7.23 million that had been spent patching potholes by Jan. 19, 2021, compared to \$3.32 million so far in 2022. The department allocated \$9.16 million for pothole patching in its latest budget.

TDOT advised that motorists should be prepared for short-term traffic delays during repair oper-

ations. The release stated that "every effort will be made to perform repairs during off-peak travel times, from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m. on weekdays, some lane closures may extend into the late afternoon, evening, and weekends."

To report a pothole on a county road, contact the Wilson County Road Commission at 615-444-9022.

Motorists can alert TDOT to potholes on state roads using the maintenance request form in the department's website.



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