



KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Crumbling roads crushed into gravel

Sunday, August 16, 2009

Kalamazoo

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PAW PAW -- A stretch of 60th Street, patched for years, blisters with cracks and potholes.

The Paw Paw road is bumpy and crumbling -- and soon to be turned back into gravel.

Converting pothole-plagued pavement into gravel is a growing trend among the state's county road agencies, who say they can't afford some costly repaving projects. Instead, they are crushing up deteriorating roads.

The Van Buren County Road Commission had two options to fix 60th Street: Pulverize the 1.25-mile stretch of road into gravel and lay asphalt 3 inches thick, or pulverize it into gravel and leave it. County officials chose the latter, which will result in a savings of about \$145,000.

Since last year, some 25 road agencies in Michigan have transformed once-paved roads into gravel to save money. An additional 11 county road commissions are considering similar projects, officials said.

The reason: Paving costs continue to soar while revenues from fuel taxes and registration fees for state road commissions have plummeted this year by nearly \$100 million.

Even with the roadwork savings, though, some gravel projects have been dropped because of opposition from motorists and residents.

Eight roads in Van Buren County originally were proposed to be converted to gravel.

Three of the projects -- stretches of County Road 376 in Bangor, County Road 380 in Columbia Township and County Road 374 in Lawrence -- were nixed because residents said they would rather try to navigate the potholes and crumbling pavement than contend with dusty, gravel-covered roads.

"The residents have indicated they would rather dodge potholes than drive on gravel," said Greg Pardike, an accountant with the Van Buren County Road Commission. "Of course, they would prefer a brand new, repaved road."

Reverting to a gravel road is not an ideal situation, said John Niemela, director of the County Road Association of Michigan.

"It really is genuinely looking at what the road conditions are today and looking at the resources we have to maintain and improve them," he said.

Repaving one mile of road in Van Buren County costs up to \$120,000, while turning that same stretch of road to gravel costs \$4,000, said Larry Hummel, engineer manager for the county Road Commission.

Hummel estimated it will cost \$14,044 to convert 60th Street and stretches of three other roads to gravel, as well as a small portion of the Kal-Haven Trail. Work on the four roads, covering about 2.6 miles, should be completed by the end of the month.

About 100 feet of road on each side of the 28th Avenue bridge in Arlington Township already has been converted to gravel.

Officials in Kalamazoo, Allegan and St. Joseph counties are not planning any gravel-road projects at this time, but they would not rule out that option if funding continues to decline.

"When you pave a road, you put an investment in it originally," said Bill Nelson, managing director for the Allegan County Road Commission. "You lose the investment when you turn it back to gravel."

Targeted roads

Along with the stretch of 60th Street between County Road 665 and Paw Paw Road, the three other Van Buren County roads slated to have portions converted to gravel are:

- v A 750-foot stretch of 76th Avenue in Decatur, east of 46th Street.

- v A half-mile stretch of Country Road 665 in Paw Paw, south of 72nd Avenue.

- v A little more than a half-mile stretch of 40th Street, at County Road 358 and proceeding north, in Paw Paw Township. The township will repave 40th Street after that stretch is converted to gravel.

Reverting to gravel on low-traffic roads has been done to some degree for years, and long-term savings and maintenance costs vary.

The Van Buren Road Commission is looking to cut costs, since it is facing a \$300,000 shortfall in transportation funds this year.

"And next year it's supposed to get worse," Pardike said.

More than funding woes

Declining revenues is only part of the problem when it comes to funding road repairs.

The cost of asphalt has increased by nearly 90 percent since 2004, Hummel said. And county road agencies were largely left out of the federal stimulus package, which focuses on highways and other major thoroughfares.

"Pretty soon we're all going to be driving on a gravel road or dodging potholes just to get to work, so they're (lawmakers) going to have to do something," Hummel said.

Road commissions in Allegan and St. Joseph counties said they're not converting any roads to gravel because their roads aren't that bad yet.

"I can think of a couple (roads) if we did get to that," said Bruce Jones, the engineer manager for the St. Joseph County Road Commission. "But traffic would be horrendous on those roads on a gravel road."

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