

Potholes That Ate Indianapolis Devour U.S. City Budgets

By Mark Niquette

Rieth-Riley Construction Co. typically closes its Indianapolis asphalt plants from December through March. Not this year. Too many potholes to fill.

Officials asked Rieth-Riley to fire up a plant six weeks early to help fill what the city said is a record number of craters, a moonscape replicated across the nation amid a brutal winter. U.S. cities including New York and Pittsburgh and states such as [Michigan](#) are contending with an unprecedented road-repair season, straining work crews and budgets already depleted by plowing and salting.

Besides starting the asphalt plant early, Indianapolis, which has already exceeded its winter maintenance budget by almost \$5 million, is hiring contractors and diverting workers as it combats the motorist's scourge of blown-out tires and twisted suspensions.

"We're throwing everything we can at it," said Lori Miser, director of the Indianapolis Department of Public Works. "We're seeing our roads in the worst condition probably than we ever have."

About three-fourths of U.S. states and many cities have outspent their maintenance budgets dealing with the extreme weather, said Greta Smith, an associate program director with the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials in [Washington](#). She said this pothole season is "one of the worst in memory."

Limited Kitty

The potholes are emblematic of a deeper chasm. The gap between the cost of improvements to U.S. transportation infrastructure and available revenue from both state and federal sources was as much as \$147 billion, according to a 2009 National Transportation Infrastructure Financing Commission report.

They also contribute to substandard conditions on more than a quarter of U.S. urban roads that cost the average driver using them \$377 a year and \$80 billion nationwide, according to [TRIP](#), a nonprofit transportation research group in Washington. The current plague has diverted resources, the group said.

"That money comes out of a finite budget, and so when you have a harsher climate for your infrastructure and even less money to spend on repairs, that's asking for trouble," said **Rocky Moretti**, director of policy and research.

In winter, water and road salt seep into cracks, then expand and contract, finally undermining the pavement. A pothole is born.

Potholes, Live!

Indianapolis, which has a "[Pothole Viewer](#)" to report and track what Mayor Greg Ballard said is a record tally, has received almost 4,500 more complaints about them this year compared with the same period last year.

The city normally uses what's called a cold mix of small stone and liquid asphalt to temporarily fill the hollows until plants fire up to produce hot asphalt for a more permanent fix.

It took six days and about nine workers to restart Rieth-Riley's heating units and bring frozen rocks, sand, aggregates and emulsions to required temperatures, said David Dankert, general superintendent for the Indianapolis area.

The humble goo is an economic balm.

Storms in January probably cost more than [\\$3.5 billion](#) in economic losses, including business interruption and property damage, insurance broker Aon Plc said this month. Burst pipes, falling trees and roof collapses inflated costs to home insurers including [Allstate Corp. \(ALL\)](#) and Chubb Corp.

Gaping Maw

Risks to auto insurers have been cushioned by a decrease in the number of motorists, some of whom are cowed by snow and ice, said Tom Wilson, chief executive officer of Allstate, the largest publicly traded U.S. home and auto insurer.

"In some cases, where an entire city is shut down like Atlanta, actually people drive less," he said in a Feb. 5 interview.

Pothole damage can cost as much as \$700, said Matt Barney, manager of the [Chicago](#) region for Bridgestone Retail Operations. He has even seen motors wrecked as they ricochet off the pavement.

Todd Curry, president of the Curry Agency in Fishers, [Indiana](#), estimated that he'll see as much as a 25 percent increase in auto claims.

"Every day, the potholes seem to get bigger and bigger," Curry said.

The one that got Ashley Yates of [Las Vegas](#), who repairs [slot machines](#) and travels frequently to casinos, was manhole-sized. She encountered it Feb. 18 outside Chicago.

Besides about \$400 in damage from two blown tires and bent rims, Yates, 27, had to



Photographer: Charles Rex Arbogast/AP Photo
Motorists traveling on Chicago's Austin Ave. dodge potholes as the effects of a harsh winter continue to challenge the city's infrastructure on Feb. 12, 2014.

wait more than 10 hours for a tow because trucks were helping other motorists, she said.

'Epic Season'

The meter for states and municipalities keeps ticking.

The Michigan Legislature is considering allocating an additional \$100 million to the transportation department, counties and cities for plowing and salting roads and fixing holes.

In [New York](#), the most populous U.S. city, crews have filled a record 113,131 potholes this year, up from the 50,434 patched at this point in 2013, the city said in a release. The American Automobile Association in New York has received more than 80,000 calls for flats from potholes among its 1.3 million members in the city and eight surrounding counties, said Robert Sinclair, a spokesman.

"We are facing an epic season," he said.

Mayor Bill de Blasio is adding \$7.3 million for street repairs to the city's \$74 billion budget because of "unprecedented wear and tear."

Spring begins with the equinox at 12:57 p.m. New York time on March 20. Vernal visions of relief are mirages, said Smith of the [American Association](#) of State Highway and Transportation Officials:

"We're moving into rain and flood season now," she said. "That's only going to make things worse."

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