

# State's neglect of roadways evident in lengthy lane closure on Interstate 90

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NORTH BEND — A diamond-shaped sign on an Interstate 90 onramp warns drivers of “Men Working,” though no one is fixing the freeway through this historic mountain town.

In fact, the scene behind the orange cones hasn’t changed since early January, when dangerous potholes caused the Washington State Department of Transportation to close the right westbound lane, between Exit 32 for Mount Si and Exit 31 to the city’s outlet stores.

Motorists are being squeezed from three lanes to two, probably until September when WSDOT says it can complete lasting repairs.

This is a rare, and maybe unprecedented, shutdown of a freeway lane in Washington state for an extended time without construction.

The largest pothole measures 70 feet long, slightly deeper than 2 inches, and as wide as the entire lane. Three layers are exposed: the concrete base, a shredded, tarlike black layer and crumbled, gray surface crust.

“Fix it. Fix the road so people can drive on it,” said Dave Sharpy, a frequent I-90 traveler from North Bend. “We’re in the middle of July. It’s very frustrating as a taxpayer.”

Last winter’s unusually heavy snowstorms, compounded by day after day of freezes, formed potholes so vast that a standard, rapid patch job became impossible, according to Brian Nielsen, WSDOT regional administrator.

This location, on a South Fork Snoqualmie River overpass, tends to freeze and thaw quickly,

causing saturated pavement to burst from within.

Repairs are being funded by a \$6.5 million emergency contract, won by low bidder Lakeside Industries on June 28, to resurface 88 damaged spots across Whatcom, Skagit, Snohomish and King counties.

Road surfaces in Washington state declined for years due to underinvestment and procrastination, even while WSDOT built new highway megaprojects that politicians, business associations and drivers have supported since the early 2000s. Finally in 2022, the Legislature set aside \$3 billion for maintenance in the \$11.4 billion highways portion of a 16-year spending plan.

Nielsen said it's fair to blame many damaged areas across the state on historic low maintenance, but not this particular closure. The position at the foot of the mountains causes extra truck braking, while the curve adds wheel forces, he said. The overpass was resurfaced as recently as 2016, and this year's fix wasn't impeded by lack of money, officials said.

"I think this is a fairly unique structure, in regard to the type of failure," Nielsen said.

#### **Stressed drivers**

Those same traits make this a stressful spot to crimp as the three-lane freeway is along the nation's busiest mountain passes, where a total of 43,000 daily vehicles go through North Bend.

Drivers get 1 mile of advance warning. The 70 mph limit remains, and most car and truck speeds vary between 55 mph and 85 mph.

"It can be a little hazardous at times if you don't pay attention, especially if you don't live around here.

There's RVs, trailers and a lot of people move on Sunday," said J.P. Taylor, a clerk at The General Store off Exit 32.

Deliveries have been harder for neighboring Cascade Lumber, where truckers merging onto westbound I-90 must accelerate to highway speed before the cones.

"They get frustrated, and sometimes they have to stop, because they can't get over," said sales representative Kevin Sepkowski.

Often, a road department would patch holes immediately with sticky blacktop known as "cold mix," but Nielsen said it's too soft to withstand the pounding at this site.

He said cold and rainy weather early this year prevented a stronger option — hiring a trusted contractor to install fast-drying or synthetic concrete.

"What we don't want to do is have to be out there over and over again, doing repairs that expose our staff to safety issues, and cost a lot of money," he said.

Therefore, WSDOT decided in January to wait for the dry season to perform a conventional asphalt repave, which is supposed to last 12 to 15 years, he said.

Nielsen defends the state's decision to bundle the North Bend repairs with other work, which took until May to fully design, especially the safety-critical traffic control plans for all 88 jobs.

Back in 2013, WSDOT acted lightning-fast by installing a temporary replacement span at the Interstate 5 Skagit River bridge within four weeks, and a permanent span in four months, after an overheight truck caused a partial bridge collapse.

State Rep. Andrew Barkis, R-Olympia, a senior member of the House Transportation Committee, said the closed I-90 lane reflects misplaced priorities by state government.

The first time he saw the damage, while driving home, Barkis figured construction would start soon. The second time, he thought of warnings by Transportation Secretary Roger Millar that lanes will close across the state unless lawmakers invest more to catch up on maintenance.

In recent years, the state spent only \$580 million a year on preservation and maintenance, or half the needed amount, Millar reported.

The new \$3 billion infusion helps narrow the gap.

"When this is discovered, it would be just as easy to make the repairs, put down asphalt, keep the lane in use, avoid hazards and traffic situations, while you design a permanent fix," Barkis said.

"What we see now is a pattern of letting things fail until we have to do the big project."

Washington state ranks 43rd in pavement roughness, with 72% of state and local lane miles in acceptable condition, compared with an 81.0% national average, according to Bureau of Transportation Statistics data. For interstate highways, which are top priority, WSDOT's 96.4% slightly trails the 96.7% U.S. average, in 2020 data.

In transportation meetings this summer, Barkis said he's cited the North Bend lane as an example of failure. Along a thoroughfare as important as I-90, with a work area less than 1 mile, WSDOT should be moving faster, he said.

"They have the ability to do it; it's just a matter of doing it."

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