

This is KPTZ 91.9FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Nigel O'Shea bringing you news and commentary from the Jefferson County *Beacon* for Christmas Day, Wednesday, January 15, 2025.

If you spend any time on social media, you'll notice that every post about the city spending money on something is met with a myriad of comments asking why they did X instead of fixing the potholes. Sometimes, it's not even that the money was earmarked from one particular grant; instead, a project is funded from a whole other entity or money has been budgeted for a completely different project. The truth is that potholes are complicated, even if you feel like they shouldn't be. It's hard to get grant funding for maintenance, and a number of factors mean that Port Townsend is in a unique position to be riddled with potholes.

Steve King, the Director of Public Works, said, "So you have to go back into Port Townsend history to understand the whole scheme. But there are several major contributors." Port Townsend was initially developed to be a big metropolis, the San Francisco of the north. However, thanks to a combination of economic challenges, that honor went to Seattle instead. Unfortunately, many of our roads had already been created, giving a very rural city more roads than it could afford to maintain. King said, "We have 88 miles of roads that we maintain for our population of 10,000, and that's a huge tax burden on the population that lives here."

Furthermore, the roads in Port Townsend were poorly built, as the city experienced a substantial economic hit when it didn't grow the way it was expected to. Instead of using layers of gravel and asphalt, the original road builders only used oil to keep the dust down, and then a really thin layer of rock and oil called a chip seal. Things that started badly have only gotten worse over time, especially in the 2000s when several initiatives led by Tim Eyman cut state funding for local roads maintenance. King said "Many cities either completely stopped maintaining roads, which was the case of Port Townsend."

Eventually, state legislature realized they had a problem and enacted the ability for districts to raise money locally. Though many cities started passing measures to repair local roads around 2010, Port Townsend was a late adopter of this local taxing system and didn't enact a 3% tax until 2023. The only repair that the city has been able to do over the last 20 years is to fill in potholes with a cheap product called cold mix, which doesn't work as well as grinding the pothole out and repairing it with hot asphalt. Using cold mix usually just results in another pothole forming nearby.

One final factor contributes to the state of our roads: poor drainage. Over the years, the ditches have filled in alongside the road, allowing the water to sit on the edge of the pavement and soften the ground underneath, breaking the pavement. King said, "If you look at a lot of our streets, they are breaking up from the outside and moving their way towards the center of the street." Over the past few years King's department has been busy attempting to reinstall ditches and rain gardens to improve street drainage before they attempt any major resurfacing work. Though we're in a better position to fix the roads than we've ever been, King warns us that the changes are going to be slow to come. King said, "Because we are changing the way we repair roads to do more quality repairs that will last longer, we expect it to get a little bit worse before it gets better because it takes more time to do it right. But our hope is that by doing it right, we can actually take small bites at the apple and get ahead of the streets over time." King is asking for grace and patience while they work towards a more sustainable way of making and repairing the streets.

One thing both King and City Operations Manager Brian Reid have made clear is that people are not supposed to fill in their own potholes, regardless of how tempting it is to do so. According to Reid, it can be tricky to fix a pothole correctly, and it can be counterproductive to tackle it yourself. Reid said, "Yeah, let us do it. There's been different materials in there, and typically, when we go to repair them, we have to take the material out and dispose of it, so it's best to report it." Instead, it's best to report potholes to the city's website. During the last

week of the month, the city's road maintenance team addresses all of the potholes in the order in which they are received, and if there are more than what were originally reported, they'll tackle those, too. Reid said, "If the request came in for a certain street, they'll knock out [all] they see on that street. If the equipment's there, they're going to do more, because they have the hot mix asphalt there. They have the machinery out, so they're gonna patch the potholes on that street and move to the next one."

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon and 5 Monday through Thursday and at noon on Saturdays, partnering on Wednesday to bring you stories from the *Jefferson County Beacon*. This is Nigel O'Shea. Happy Holidays. Thanks for listening.