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Race gap found in pothole patching

City's response is slower in minority neighborhoods

By KEEGAN KYLE, GRANT SMITH and BEN POSTON

Posted: Aug. 31, 2008

William English called the City of Milwaukee in February about his neighborhood's potholes, but no one showed for 37 days. English lives on N. 33rd St. in a predominantly minority neighborhood, where cracks and cavities took weeks to fill this year.

A statistical analysis by the Journal Sentinel found that the larger the minority population in a neighborhood, the longer it took city crews to fix potholes. Potholes in mostly minority census tracts took an average of 11 days to repair, while potholes in mostly white census tracts took seven days.

Potholes are not the most serious problem plaguing Milwaukee. But the city's many pockmarked streets can harm the quality of life for those commuting to work and force unfortunate drivers to shell out hundreds of dollars to repair damage to their vehicle.

What's more, potholes and how the city responds to them are as close as many people come to watching local government in action.

City officials say they set priorities based on several factors. A top concern is keeping heavily traveled roads safe for drivers. But the Journal Sentinel found that major roads on the north, such as Silver Spring Drive and Hampton Ave., were fixed more slowly than less traveled residential streets farther south.

The Journal Sentinel discovered the disparity in service by reviewing a city database of more than 11,000 pothole repair locations from January to mid-July. Hundreds of repairs took longer than a month from the time a complaint was logged.

An analysis of pothole fixes in the city also found:

- Residents who live on or north of Capitol Drive waited the longest for pothole repairs. It took crews an average of 14 days to fix potholes on or north of Capitol Drive, where more than three-fourths of census tracts are predominantly minority. But to the south, where 56% of census tracts are majority white, repairs took about six days - even for twice as many potholes.
- The city fell behind as complaints mounted during a difficult winter. The disparity in service was greater during the peak season of February through April, when repairs averaged 18 days north of Capitol Drive and eight days to the south. The gap narrowed during less busy months to a four-day difference.
- Pothole repairs took the longest in Ald. Ashanti Hamilton's District 1 on the north side, averaging 15 days per pothole. That's five times as long as in Ald. Tony Zielinski's 14th District in the south, where potholes took about three days to fix.
- The two district managers in charge of dispatching pothole repair crews both live in south side neighborhoods that are among the fastest served when potholes are identified.

Responding to the Journal Sentinel's analysis, Mayor Tom Barrett said the city could have done a better job distributing its repair crews equally.

"My view is that we should be . . . making sure that pothole response is consistent throughout the entire city. Obviously we were tested on this," Barrett said. "In retrospect, should we have added more (crews in the north) to even it out? I would say yes."

The Department of Public Works, which handles street maintenance, insisted that race is not a factor in determining when and where potholes are fixed on Milwaukee's 1,400 miles of city streets.

"We categorically do not base our service delivery on demographics," public works spokeswoman Cecelia Gilbert said.

Common Council President Willie Hines Jr. said the Journal Sentinel's findings raise questions that merit further investigation.

"Obviously it's worth assessing and ensuring that city services are being delivered equally," said Hines, whose own district took an average of seven days to repair. "It's definitely unacceptable to deliver services because you are a particular ethnicity."

Hamilton said there can be no excuse for unequal service.

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Pothole repair crews are supposed to fix the most heavily traveled roads first. Residential areas are a lower priority, officials said. They also said the far north side of the city has more aging residential streets, leading to more complaints that are difficult to keep up with.

Goal is a moving target

Crews generally aim for a citywide average of four to 10 days on pothole repairs, said Dale Mejaki, who manages field operations for public works. That goal is harder to meet during severe weather.

Even counting the difficult winter months, workers have met that mark overall - a nine-day average so far in 2008. But they fall short on the north side.

"The sheer magnitude of (the weather) led us to a policy decision . . . to concentrate on the arterials," said city engineer Jeff Polenske. "These are the streets we need to maintain for public safety."

But the Journal Sentinel found that complaints about potholes on arterial streets in the north part of the city took longer to address than on arterial streets south of Capitol Drive, even when considering daily traffic counts.

For example, pothole complaints on Silver Spring Drive took an average of nine days to address, while potholes farther south, on Oklahoma Ave., took an average of three days to fix.

Adjusting the repair time to account for daily traffic volumes, potholes on Silver Spring still went unfilled twice as long as on Oklahoma Ave. Other arterial roads in the north and south showed similar differences.

A review of pothole repairs on residential streets in 17 neighborhoods south of Capitol Drive showed that response times for high-priority arterial streets in the north were longer or equal to response times for low-priority residential streets in the south of the city.

Officials said the Journal Sentinel analysis doesn't take into account other factors such as age or size of roadways and pothole severity. The city's own database of repairs doesn't track this information. City officials added that their database contains errors and may inaccurately reflect the response time of repair crews. Still, officials said they have no problem using the data to assess their annual progress.

"We're constantly looking for ways to improve it that will allow us to use that data more as a management tool than just a deployment tool," Polenske said.

Gilbert, the public works spokeswoman, said the department would try to improve its tracking by having workers record repairs promptly after completion.

Pothole complaints up

While city officials review their policies, William English continues to navigate his neighborhood as if it's a mine field. As block captain of his north side neighborhood, English said he was outraged by the Journal Sentinel's findings.

"It just seems like a shame, because they're being paid a reasonable wage at taxpayer expense to service all people of different ethnicities," said English, who is white. "I'd need more than two hands to count all the cars damaged by the pothole mess."

English isn't the only steamed resident. City records show that many others were frustrated by this year's turnaround time.

City attorneys received three times as many damage claims for roadway defects during the first half of 2008 as in all of 2007.

Motorists who think the city will reimburse them for damage caused by potholes can think again. Only one person had received money as of July 1. The city logged 70% more pothole complaints during the first six months of 2008 than in the same time period in 2007, said Mejaki, the public works official.

One pothole service request contained 16 exclamation points. Other comments used obscenities or colorful analogies to describe the potholes as trenches, craters, moats, an 8-foot monster or sinkholes.

People said potholes were "going to break my car in half" or were "so big it could swallow up a garbage truck." Those requests waited 20 days and 16 days, respectively.

About one-third of all pothole repairs took more than one week to make, and 154 took more than two months. The longest wait was 91 days for a residential cul-de-sac at the end of W. Wanda Ave., about two miles west of Mitchell International Airport.

"Something's definitely wrong there," said Steve Sitzberger, a former street repair district manager. "Two weeks is too long."

When Sitzberger retired last year after nearly 35 years of service, he oversaw pothole repairs for the northern half of Milwaukee. He said crews should average responding to complaints in four to six days.

Pressured by residents, the Common Council in March approved a resolution by Zielinski calling on Public Works to present a thorough report on pothole repairs. The Public Works Committee delayed the report and hasn't scheduled a meeting to address the issue.

"Even though my district is receiving the fastest work," Zielinski said, "it's still not an acceptable level."

In the next two months, the city comptroller's office will also release an audit on how Department of Public Works conducts street maintenance and reconstruction. It is meant to look specifically at street life cycles, not pothole repairs.

Political favors uncertain

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and District 7 Ald. Willie Wade. Records show both aldermen called the city at least three times over four months. Zielinski's requests on the south side were handled in a few days, while Wade's requests in the north took up to 45 days.

Wade, a longtime member of the Public Works Committee, declined to comment.

The ultimate decision of where to dispatch crews lies in the hands of district managers Ronald Golec and Daryl Sobczak. According to their last listed addresses, both men live on the city's south side in some of the fastest repaired areas.

Sobczak lives in an area that sees its potholes fixed in five days. Golec lives in an area where potholes are fixed in six days. By contrast, the mayor lives in a neighborhood that takes about nine days for pothole repairs.

Attempts to interview Sobczak were unsuccessful. Four calls placed to his listed home phone number resulted in hang-ups. Golec referred requests for comment to city officials, who said that where managers live has no bearing on response time.

Until recently, the city's street maintenance division had three district managers. The city consolidated the work into two positions when Bill Lewis retired in January 2007. Lewis departed with 17 years of experience serving the northern district. Sitzberger, his replacement, retired five months later.

"We all grew up as laborers through the system over the years," Sitzberger said. "There was experience lost."

Crews trying to catch up

During its peak winter season, Public Works had an unprecedented 24 crews working on potholes.

In July, Mejaki joked that Wisconsin's winter still wasn't over because repair crews were recovering from its wrath. Comparing the first six months of 2008 to 2007, the city put in 82% more work hours on potholes.

City officials say that pothole repair was a frustrating job because plows, traffic and weather unearthed patches of freshly laid asphalt. Fixes might last only one week during winter. During the summer, repairs can move much faster and last months.

Even so, city worker Craig Maier found himself last week filling potholes on W. Carmen Ave. for the third time this summer. Heavy trucks quickly degrade patches on the road, a small hub for manufacturing near Highway 100.

Maier scooped hot asphalt into the worst spots, slapped the pavement twice with the backside of his shovel and waved his partner to move the truck forward.

One pothole can take a few minutes to fill, but a bad stretch can take hours. Maier said he ignores minor cracks because rain would wash away the asphalt mix.

After a while, he passed the shovel to his partner and took the wheel. On a large job, both men grab a shovel and spread the black tar, Maier said.

To minimize driving time between jobs, crews are sent to regions with multiple potholes for a "strategic sweep."

City officials say that potential safety hazards are given top priority.

But that's not always the case, records show.

In March, a resident from the 4900 block of N. 73rd St. called the city and said "potholes have metal spikes coming up . . . keeps popping tires."

The location is in a predominantly minority area on the north side of town that typically waits 16 days for its repairs.

Edgar Thomas lives near the reported location, and he said pieces of rebar were all over the street. He took a proactive approach and collected some of the mess.

But the city ignored the problem. An anonymous resident called six days after the first request and registered a second complaint.

City crews didn't show for 37 days after the second call.

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