Potholes driving many cars to garages

Thaw, rain bring out the worst in roads

By Erica Noonan, Globe Staff | March 15, 2010

BROOKLINE — Suddenly Massachusetts driving has become much less icy, but a lot more bumpy.

The thaw of early March is producing a booming crop of potholes, as months of scraping snowplows and freeze-and-thaw cycles inflict damage on the surface of aging state highways and local byways.

Potholes are aggravated by several factors, highway specialists say, including the age of pavement, traffic volume, and the weight of vehicles.

But the most significant factor is the freezing and thawing in the dead of winter, a pattern that allows streams of water to create cracks in the road, even during what meteorologists say has been a fairly mild winter, so far.

Local mechanics are already on notice. Until May, nearly 20 percent of the cars that drive — or are towed — into Sullivan Tire on Commonwealth Avenue will most likely be there for pothole-related damage.

Some cars — like a Dodge Charger with Connecticut plates sitting forlornly in the lot Thursday — were literally stopped in their tracks with a blown tire. Other cars limp in with bent or broken wheels, twisted rims, or gouged tires. Sometimes a tire survives a close encounter with a road crater, but the car’s alignment or suspension is damaged by the jolt.

Potholes are at least partially responsible for about four of the 30 cars serviced at the Brookline shop on an average day this month, and that number will probably rise as the snow melts for good, said manager Richard Lobo Jr.

Three tow trucks carrying road-crippled cars arrived within a few hours of each other last week. “Those drivers,” Lobo said, “were not happy.”

There is no statewide census of the thousands of roadway gouges and craters, said Adam Hurtubise, spokesman for the Massachusetts Department of Transportation.

“We have [potholes] throughout the state. I don’t believe there is one area that is worse than any other,” Hurtubise said.

State officials expect to spend about $2 million on pothole patching and repair this year, on par with its outlays of the past few years.

In late winter and early spring, the agency receives as many as 100 pothole complaints daily from drivers, as well as additional calls from municipal and police officials. State crews scramble to fill them each day.

“They quite often find additional potholes and repair those as well. We know motorists hate potholes. We hate potholes, too,” Hurtubise said.

Tracking them is tricky, he said. They can take years to develop, but can then open up and pop off hubcaps within a matter of hours.

A few years ago older stretches of Interstate 495 through Haverhill and Amesbury were notoriously hazardous for potholes, Hurtubise said. But that area has since been resurfaced, which should make for smoother driving for some years to come, he said.

Several days of rainy weather were blamed for a 10-by-10-foot sinkhole that yawned open on the morning of Feb. 26 on Route 99 in Everett, delaying commuters for hours.
Local streets can be pockmarked as well.

Thanh Dinh, 38, of Boston said her car has been damaged by potholes several times over the years.

A physician, Dinh tries to take the MBTA to work at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center whenever possible, but had to return to work one evening recently.

It was not her lucky night. She drove through a pothole on Brookline Avenue near the Longwood Medical Center entrance. The bill: $200 to repair the tire and straighten the bent rim, she said.

“Driving in Boston is like driving in an obstacle course. You have to pay attention to the lights, avoid the aggressive pedestrians as well as the holes in the road,” said Dinh.

In July 2009 the City of Boston launched an iPhone application allowing drivers to register pothole complaints via their Smartphones. As of Thursday, 315 pothole complaints were registered, and most were addressed within 48 hours, said Katie Ward, a spokeswoman for Mayor Thomas M. Menino’s office.

An interactive map — published on the city’s website — shows complaints logged from every corner of the city, with especially high concentrations in the Financial District and Back Bay.

The best way to patch potholes is by pouring hot liquid asphalt into and over the cracked area and smoothing it with a roller, a solid covering that can last for several years or more.

But on the coldest, windiest days, crews must resort to a less-desirable quick fix called cold patching, using a rocky gravel compound, applied by crews with shovels, that often comes loose again in a matter of months, state officials said.

Last week a Brockton-based company, The Pothole Medic, was busy in suburbs south of Boston pouring hot asphalt patches in Medway, Scituate, and Carver, said manager Rick Nilson.

His company is busy this time of year working for corporations like Dunkin’ Donuts and Stop & Shop, which need pothole repairs in their parking lots, and towns that sometimes pay $2,500 daily to supplement the efforts of their own public works departments.

“It seems like things are a little worse this year, because of all the rain,” said Nilson.

Tom Holder, Medway’s public services director, said road maintenance is a perpetual struggle for small towns, which appeal for state help with the repairs whenever possible but have to dig into their own operating budgets to repair locally owned roads.

“We have a small department, and a lot of roads are in pretty poor condition” to begin with, he said. “But public safety is critical, so we have to have people out there.”

It is also not cheap to repair a car on the wrong end of a pothole encounter. Replacement of two wrecked wheels and tires on a luxury car can top $1,500, said Chris Oxner, mechanical quality assurance coordinator at the Norwell headquarters of Sullivan Tire.

Long-term alignment trouble can cost car owners much more in wasted fuel, wear-and-tear on tires, and suspension problems, he said.

“My advice to people is, if you see a bunch of hubcaps sitting by the side of the road, slow down and be really careful,” said Oxner.

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