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Potholes - the bane of winter

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 George Hesselberg Wisconsin State Journal

The pothole is as seasonal as a mitten. The world's shortest unmarked detour, a typical pothole creates irritation and often expense way out of proportion with its size.

But it gets filled and life rolls on - or over - maybe a little bumpier for a while, maybe with a little crackling noise as the pothole mix splatters beneath your car, but rolling.

What could change that?

Only QPR, the current black- gold standard in street-cavity fillings, now appearing in some of the former potholes you just passed, especially if you drive in Dane County.

County and Madison road crews have been slowing traffic on main thoroughfares this week, taking advantage of clear avenues to fill emerging and full-blown holes.

At least eight two-person crews were "potholing" on Madison streets Wednesday, digging into a \$1.5 million budget for such repairs, said Al Schumacher, streets superintendent. A counterpart, Steve Haag, said county crews were likewise occupied.

Both agencies are using a new patch called QPR - "Quality Pavement Repair" - on some holes this season.



West Side streets division worker Terry Richardson scoops filler into a pothole Wednesday along South High Point Road, near Velvet Leaf Drive.
 (Photo by John Maniaci - State Journal)

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But there's no perfect patch, said Schumacher.

"QPR may last a little bit longer," he said, "but anytime you get moisture in there, it is

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going to eventually pop out."

Haag said the county tested QPR last year, and it is now trucked in from a quarry in Sussex at about \$50 a ton.

Both Haag and Schumacher said there appear to be more potholes and road damage this year. Haag noted an increase in "frost tenting," which is a heave in the road caused by frost. The heave settles and is broken up, leaving holes and sometimes canyons.

In Madison, the long-term reconstruction of East Washington Avenue has resulted in more potholes on the older sections. These are being filled with short-term fill because they will soon be dug up when work starts again on the project.

Everyone has a different view of potholes, depending on their usual routes.

Greg Brown, a driver for Union Cab, claims the worst stretch in Madison may be along Old Middleton Road, near the bridge at the Highlands.

"I used to have a running joke, my theory that the West Side had all the smooth roads. But the other day my theory broke down. I was bumping along all over the place over there," he said.

Potholes are no worse and no better than usual, he said, and Madison drivers may be a little spoiled.

"Compared to when I was driving my own car in Chicago, where it always felt like your wheel was going to fall off, this isn't so bad," he said.

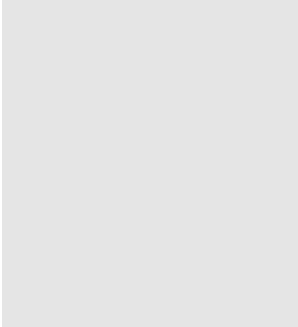
Mike Balzer, who sells QPR in eight states including Wisconsin, said the secret to a long-lasting pothole patch is the size and shape of the gravel that is soaked in oil and other chemicals, including a mysterious "anti-stripping agent."

The product is made at various locations, including Sussex and another site outside Madison.

"It can be different at each location," Balzer said, "though we would hope that it isn't. It is 5 percent oil and 95 percent stone, but how good the patch ends up depends on what kind of stone you get. The best is a quarter-inch crushed chip - that is what we want and that's what makes a great patch. No round stone."

The temperature has always been a barrier to year-round pothole filling, something Schumacher said may be addressed with yet another innovation.

The city is contemplating the purchase of a "road-patcher," which can be used in temperatures as low as 20 and puts in a "more permanent patch," a savings in time and material. It's an all-in-one machine.



"It heats up the hole, puts down a little tack material, a glue agent in there, then an oil emulsion and then stone. It builds its own blacktop," he said.

Which will, eventually, develop a hole.

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