



Dreams and Delusions

In late January, the *Chicago Tribune* ran an editorial bewailing the epidemic of potholes in Chicago area streets.

This is part of a familiar cycle in these parts. We have hot summers, cold winters, and wet springs year after year after year. Our roads and streets erupt in potholes with each cycle. And the Chicago newspapers run editorials blasting how the city and the state manage our roads.

Chances are something similar occurs in your area if you have hot and cold temperature extremes.

What was different for us this time is that we are having an unusually vicious winter, the coldest in several decades, with lots of snow. The first crop of really bone-jarring potholes came earlier than usual – March is the traditional month – and the *Tribune's* editorial came earlier than usual too.

Even more unusual was the editorial writer's proposed solution to the problem. Potholes would go away, said the *Tribune*, if we would just build our free-ways and major arterials out of concrete instead of asphalt.

Just one little problem. Most of the roads the newspaper was complaining about are concrete roads. Many of those miles have asphalt overlays, and many of the overlay miles undoubtedly represent concrete pavements that are well past their original design life. And many of the area's potholes erupt when the asphalt overlay separates from the concrete base for the usual reasons – poor drainage, compromised integrity of the base, reflective cracks in the overlay, and so on.

Our annual epidemic of potholes is a monument to our unwillingness as a state and a country (these are federal-aid highways we're talking about) to invest the money it takes to rebuild heavily used roads that have long ago exceeded their effective lives.

Our state and city engineers don't need help from a journalist to figure out what materials to use, or when a roadway needs replacing. They need a realistic budget.

Which is the most interesting part of the story. The *Chicago Tribune* opposed proposals to increase the federal fuel tax and substantially expand the federal highway program when the current transportation bill was being debated earlier this decade. The reason was that a 2-cent per gallon tax increase would be bad for the economy.

And yes, gasoline was selling for about \$1.50 a gallon at that time.

The significance of this to our industry begins with the fact that the *Chicago Tribune* is a fine newspaper. It strives to be complete, fair, and accurate. It is involved in its community. Its reporters and editors are highly motivated and among the best in their professions. They write authoritatively about many things.

And yet as sophisticated, knowledgeable, and well meaning as this organization is, its editorial writer failed to connect crumbling roads with overuse and underinvestment.

Whether you are an advocate of concrete or asphalt or whichever works for the specific application, we will not succeed in getting America to invest appropriately in our roads if this kind of naïve ignorance goes unchecked.

This incident is a call to arms in a critical year when a new federal highway bill will be debated. This underscores how important it is for us to help our industry associations and The Road Information Program educate and inform the media and elected officials on the realities of America's road and bridge situation. And we need to take it upon ourselves to let local reporters know about knowledgeable sources when we read or hear inaccurate reporting on road issues. We need to stay involved and stay committed. ❖