

EDITORIAL

Invest upfront for better roads

It's Monday morning, and we all know what that means to many people in Hawaii: Another work week gets off to a rough start, beginning with the bumpy ride to work.

Potholes have been the scourge of Hawaii drivers for decades, and last week a provocative report from a national research organization focusing on transportation issues prompted renewed discussion of the problem. TRIP — which gets its money from a range of businesses, labor unions and organizations associated with engineering and construction of transit networks — issued "Providing Safe and Efficient Mobility in Hawaii," a report with some damning observations about isle roads.

The bottom line in the report is that poor road conditions cost the driving public real money, and that Honolulu in particular has relatively severe troubles with its roads. This means highway and road planners, and the officials who procure their funding, should place a higher priority on investing in sturdier road materials, in the original construction and in patching, so that citizens can finally enjoy a more robust and lasting network of highways and streets.

The analytical reader can quibble about some of the report's details, and the state Department of Transportation certainly does. For example, said DOT spokesman Dan Meisenzahl, it's unclear in the report how one startling figure was calculated: that "driving on roads in need of repair costs each Honolulu motorist an average of \$701 each year in the form of accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional repair costs and increased fuel consumption and tire wear."

Further, Meisenzahl criticized as unsubstantiated and inconclusive the assertion that "roadway design may

be a contributing factor in approximately one-third of fatal traffic crashes" — emphasis on the word "may."

Fair enough. But even without hanging too much credibility on this individual report, what's evident even from anecdotal evidence any driver could supply is a stubborn problem that must be addressed. The report finds that 62 percent of major roads in Honolulu are in poor condition, affording a ranking as third worst among cities of its size. If that even approaches the reality in this town, such factoids shouldn't be ignored.

The issue became especially acute in the wake of unusually wet weather recently. Officials said for the week of March 4-10 they received 243 requests to fix potholes through the city's website and pothole hotline. They roughly estimated that each small pothole costs \$10 to repair. Considering that this is the tally for one week, it's easy to see how maintenance costs add up.

Meisenzahl said the state has ordered a large quantity of a newer, more resilient patching material, which should enable more lasting repairs. But it's about 10 times the cost of the conventional asphalt "hot mix," he said. He added that in recent new construction on the neighbor islands, the state has had good experience using concrete instead of asphalt.

The correct policy on road upkeep should be obvious: Money expended in better road materials at the front end will make upkeep costs more manageable.

That would be good for the taxpayer in the long term. And Hawaii drivers would appreciate a road system that doesn't siphon even more money from their pockets in excess repair bills — and they have the right to expect it.