LONG ISLAND

Study: LIers pay $719 a year for riding on rough roads
Here's how they affect your car and your psyche, and what officials are doing to smooth the roads.

Shai Eapen's 2017 Mercedes has seen better days.
Six weeks ago, Eapen struck a pothole on the Northern State Parkway. The crater cost him $600 to replace a rim. Then, just a few days ago on New Year's Eve, the New Hyde Park resident heard a familiar thud as he was traveling along the Throgs Neck Bridge.
"I hit it and knew right away," said Eapen, 42, of the pit that damaged a rim and tire.
The price tag this time: $400.
Eapen isn't alone in his frustration.
Peak pothole season is still a good two to three months away, but already the annual crop of dips is popping up across Nassau and Suffolk counties — rattling teeth and draining bank accounts for trips to the mechanic.
The $1,000 that Eapen has forked over since early November is a few hundred dollars more than the $719 that Long Island drivers on average pay every year for driving on poorly maintained roads, new research shows. The total, calculated by Washington-based transportation think tank TRIP, covers repairs as well as accelerated vehicle depreciation and increased fuel consumption.
"Rough roads are a silent thief costing the public money," said Rocky Moretti, TRIP's director of policy and research. "Investing in the transportation system will require more money from municipalities. But when these repairs are not done, the costs to everybody escalate."
Public officials know all too well just how much potholes bug motorists. They field thousands of grievances annually through an intragovernment network of 311 call centers, email tip lines and mobile apps, numbers show.
And, officials said, they take the complaints to heart and are making an effort to fill the cavities.
In the Town of Hempstead, for example, Supervisor Laura Gillen is budgeting $26 million this year and again next year for road resurfacing — roughly four times more than the $6.3 million in 2017. In 2018, the dollar amount was $17.5 million.
"We need a lot of work," Gillen said. "It's going to take time, but we have made potholes a major priority."
A patchwork approach
Counties, towns and other localities maintain 80 percent of roads nationwide and states take care of the other 20 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation.
The Town of North Hempstead, as most towns and villages do, funds pothole repairs through the operating budget of its roads department, said town spokeswoman Carole Trottere.
The annual amount varies, depending on the number and dimensions of the potholes, Trottere said. Last year, North Hempstead received 837 requests for repairs, she said.
'The problem is that governments take a reactive approach to potholes rather than being proactive. There needs to be a true strategy to deal with the problem.'
-Larry Galehouse, National Center for Pavement Preservation
Tight budgets coupled with countless potholes forces many local transportation departments to simply fill the craters rather than resurface streets, officials said. Spending the time — and money — for repaving can significantly extend the life span of a road, an industry expert said.
"The problem is that governments take a reactive approach to potholes rather than being proactive," said Larry Galehouse, who heads the National Center for Pavement Preservation at Michigan State University in East Lansing. "There needs to be a true strategy to deal with the problem."
On Long Island, municipalities are being creative in dealing with pothole repairs. The Town of Huntington is using a program this year called "Pothole Killers" that is designed to lower the cost of repairs and speed up the work. In 60 to 90 seconds, a specially equipped truck blows debris out of the pothole, sprays a substance that helps the asphalt stick, fills the hole with the asphalt and then puts on a dry top coat.
Last year, Huntington sent out three workers with shovels who could fill about 40 potholes a day for $2,000, which covered materials and wages. The truck makes about 100 patches a day at a cost of $2,500, officials said in March, during a two-week trial run.
In the Town of Hempstead, a new interactive online map lets residents plot potholes. The map also shows whether the road in need of
attention belongs to the town, county or state. About 40 percent of the residents who report a problem are ultimately rerouted to a different government agency, Gillen said.

Timing of repairs — indeed all roadwork — is key to coping with the plethora of potholes, officials said.

The Town of Islip, for example, paves as many streets as possible in spring and summer as part of its strategy to prevent potholes, said town spokeswoman Caroline Smith. “The more dollars a municipality invests in its road repaving program, the less potholes you will likely have,” she said.

Suffolk’s chief public works engineer, William Hillman, strives to identify troublesome spots on the county’s 1,575 miles of roads at just the right moment.

Repave too early and valuable years of roadway service are wasted; wait too long and the project becomes more complex and expensive, he said.

“It's all about finding that sweet spot,” Hillman said.

Rough roads

Nearly half of New York's major roads are in poor or mediocre condition, a number that climbs to nearly 70 percent on Long Island and in New York City and northern New Jersey, TRIP figures show.

A fundamental reason is a surge in traffic, transportation experts said. From 1990 through 2016, the number of vehicles on state highways jumped 15 percent, according to an analysis by TRIP.

Slightly more than 20 percent of the 11.3 million vehicles in New York are registered in Nassau and Suffolk, according to the Department of Motor Vehicles. Suffolk has roughly 1.3 million and Nassau’s total stands at roughly a million, figures show.

Heads up: A driver focused on the road may have time to avoid a pothole.

Watch the water: Go through every puddle as if it is hiding a pothole.

Slow down: The faster the car is going, the worse the damage is likely to be.

Back off: If you give yourself a little room, you also give yourself a little time to avoid the pothole that the driver ahead just hit.

Hang on: Hitting a pothole cause quite a jolt. Keep a solid grip so you don’t lose control.

Don’t brake: Avoid braking as you hit the pothole or you just might do more damage.

Pumpin’ air: Properly inflated tires are less likely to be damaged and will protect the wheels and suspension.

Sources: AAA and Ally, a digital financial services company.

By Robert Brodsky

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