

[LONG ISLAND](#)

Study: Drivers 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.



State workers repair potholes on Jericho Turnpike east of Route 110 on Friday. Photo Credit: Barry Sloan

By Robert Brodsky

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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.

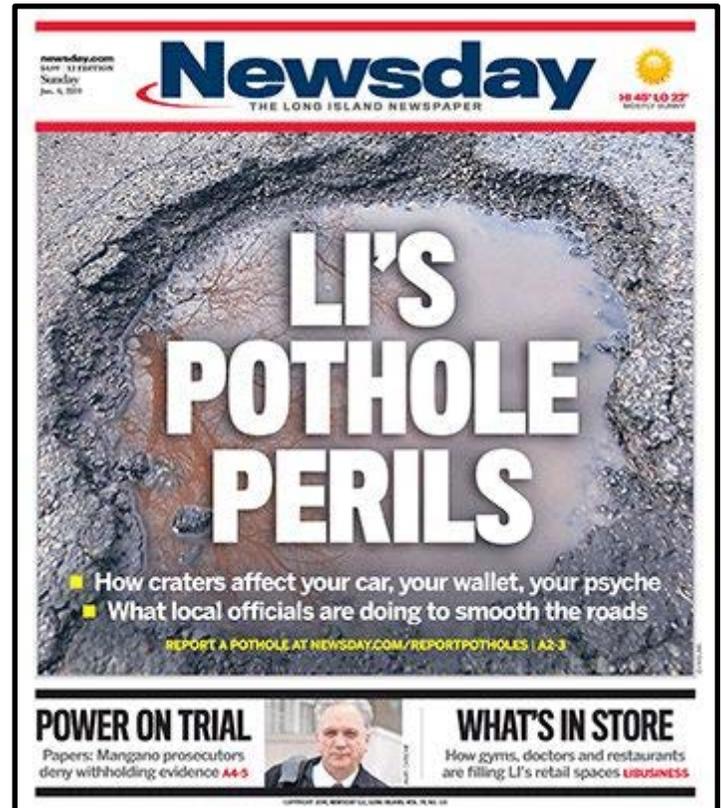
The Town of North Hempstead, as most towns and villages do, funds pothole repairs through the operating budget of its roads department, said town spokeswoman Carole Trottere.

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.



Potholes pock Route 25A in St. James during the harsh winter weather of February 2014. Photo Credit: Heather Walsh

All the daily wear and tear works with the weather, especially in the late winter and early spring, to turn the roads into an obstacle course of potholes. Water — maybe rain, maybe melting snow — seeps into cracks in the pavement, first freezing and then expanding to make the fissures bigger, experts said.

New York patches anywhere from 1.5 million to 2 million potholes each year, depending on

pavement conditions and the weather, said Glenn Bain, a spokesman for the state Department of Transportation.

"The safety of the traveling public is always our top priority," Bain said. "Department maintenance crews work aggressively to address potholes as they develop."

Repairs don't come cheap. The Transportation Department spends from \$30 million to \$50 million annually on potholes, Bain said.

The money comes from federal and state coffers.

The Federal Highway Trust Fund provides a chunk of the funding — roughly 40 percent — for state road and bridge projects, federal data show.

Revenue for the fund comes primarily from the federal fuel tax. But because the tax hasn't been raised in 25 years and isn't pegged to inflation, the fund has had to increasingly rely on transfers from the general fund to stay solvent, according to the Tax Policy Center, a nonpartisan think tank based in Washington, D.C.

The state's Consolidated Highway Improvement Program, which helps pay for local roadway resurfacing projects, has remained largely flat at about \$438 million. Nassau and Suffolk, however, saw slight dips in their respective allocations last year, state numbers show.

CHIPS funding is critical for localities strapped for cash because it lets them do the routine maintenance that prevents potholes, said Marc Herbst, executive director of the Long Island Contractors Association.

"The longer we delay the more it will cost in the long run," Herbst said.

Behind the wheel

Potholes drive motorists to distraction. That's a no-brainer. But why? What's the thought process?

The answer is layered, said psychologist Leon James, who has spent a good deal of his career studying the effect of driving on the human mind.

First, there is the stress of bumping along a bad road. That stress, in turn, creates a negative climate that encourages dangerous expressions of road rage.

Here's how: A driver who is on the lookout for potholes slows down, upsetting others behind him. They don't realize how bad the road is and get angry at the driver ahead for holding them up.

There's even more, though. The driver who knows about the pothole is getting hot under the collar, too — at roads officials, said James, who teaches at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

"Drivers who hit a pothole display an extreme emotional reaction due to fear of damage to their car," he said. "This negative psychological state can last minutes during which the driver is

not in full control. ... During these dangerous minutes, the driver engages in thoughts of blaming transportation officials and fantasizing punishing them in various cruel ways."

Many times, the fear translates into reality.

At Al's Hubcaps in Mineola, owner Al Eisenberg starts seeing his pothole business pick up beginning in January. Most drivers, he said, come in with bent or cracked wheels, bubbles in their tires or their tires completely blown out.

Damage to wheels and tires will set drivers back an average of about \$600 at TLC Auto and Truck Center in Farmingdale, said operations manager Jim Sabellico.

Once in a rare while, Sabellico sees serious suspension damage — a broken control arm or a blown-out shock.

Gerardo Russo of Long Island City knows all about the damage and the anger. Last week, Russo hit what he described as a "massive crater" near Exit 32 of the Long Island Expressway, sending his brand-new 2019 BMW to the shop for repairs on a rim and a tire.

"I bought the thing nine days ago," Russo said as he waited at Al's Hubcaps. "I was so freaking mad."

With Rachel Uda and David Schwartz

Tips on how to avoid a pothole:

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.



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