Report: Boise has some of the best roads in the West

Boise roads pass muster as among the best in the country. An independent evaluation of Ada County’s primary roads determined that 86 percent are in “very good” condition, 13 percent are “good” and only 1 percent are poor. Less than 1 percent are in very poor condition, according to Nichols Consulting Engineers, a Reno-based consulting engineering, planning and environmental firm.

Nichols was brought in last year by the Ada County Highway District to evaluate all arterial and collector roads. This summer, Nichols is evaluating all of ACHD’s residential streets.

A separate July 2015 report by TRIP, a national transportation research group, found that Boise’s roads are among the best in all urban areas. “Bumpy Roads Ahead: America’s Roughest Rides and Strategies to Make Our Roads Smoother” found that 52 percent of Boise’s roads are “good,” whereas in the nation as a whole only 31 percent are good.

Only seven of 62 other cities that, like Boise, occupy the 250,000 to 500,000 urban population category topped 50 percent “good,” while only three cities in the 500,000 population and above category had more than 50 percent of their road rated as “good,” according to “Bumpy Roads.”

“I would say Boise is in the top 5 percent,” said Margot Yapp, the vice president at Nichols Engineering who did the Ada County analysis as well as a “couple hundred” others across Washington, Oregon and California. “ACHD makes a very conscientious effort of maintaining their roads.”

Ada County’s roads rate a Pavement Condition Index of 83 or “very good,” said Jayson Buchholz, ACHD’s pavement management engineer.

In contrast, the San Francisco Bay Area as a whole rates an overall PCI of 66 or “fair.” The half dozen Bay Area cities with a PCI above 80 all have populations of less than 75,000. An estimated 425,000 live in Ada County.

ACHD and the Bay Area determine their PCI using a pavement management database called StreetSaver, developed by the Bay Area’s Metropolitan Transportation Commission. The Pavement Condition Index was developed by the United States Army Corps of Engineers to crunch incidences and types of pavement distresses into a scale of 1 to 100.

“Maintenance, improvement and rebuilding, in that order, is our policy,” Buchholz said. As an independent entity, ACHD oversees about 2,100 miles of Ada County roads and urban streets – excluding state highways – and bridges. It has a $97 million budget from property taxes, state gas taxes, development impact fees and vehicle registration fees. Its jurisdiction includes Boise, Eagle, Garden City, Kuna, Meridian, Star and the unincorporated areas of Ada County.
ACHD since mid-June has been investing $9 million in maintenance of nearly all arterial roads and about half of the residential streets between downtown and Orchard-Gowan-Eisenman roads. These 520 lane miles are getting layers of gravel chip seal and fog seal designed to extend the life of the roadway for six years. That is the next time chipsealing is scheduled to ACHD’s District 4. “In the last five years, the Highway District has spent $12 million to $16 million a year on pavement maintenance alone,” ACHD Director Bruce Wong said in an October release.

Only 25 percent of Ada County’s roads were rated as mediocre or fair by TRIP. Only one other mid-size city has a lower figure. Anniston, Ala., came in at 24 percent. The national average is 41 percent.

TRIP and Nichols Consulting use different methodologies that Yapp characterizes as “apples and oranges.” TRIP employs the International Roughness Index, a mathematical formula involving the vibration that road conditions pass through a vehicle. A “good” road delivers a smooth ride.

Nichols Consulting Engineers defines as “very good” a fairly smooth roadway with few potholes and no cracks. “Good” is an older roadway with climate-related distress and some alligator cracking. “Poor” requires major rehabilitation caused by rutting, extensive alligator cracking and utility cuts that have undermined the roadway, Yapp said.

“(ACHD) does a fantastic job maintaining and keeping (roads) in good condition,” she said. “I have nothing but good things to say about ACHD.”