

Holey potholes! Departments make emergency fixes to I-84

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NAMPA — Nampa resident Tom Muncy knows he is fortunate to escape Tuesday night's run-in with a pothole on an Interstate 84 exit ramp with only two blown out tires.

“It felt like I'd ran over who knows what,” Muncy said about a deep gouge he estimated at more than a foot wide and at least four-feet long on the westbound Northside Boulevard exit ramp. “It was pretty jarring. Had I been going faster, I would have probably damaged the rims.”

Muncy's experience, not uncommon among other Canyon County residents, may mean that the Idaho Transportation Department could move up a \$15 million, long-term improvement project planned for 2018 or 2019 to next summer.

That's according to ITD spokeswoman Jennifer Gonzalez, who said the project will focus on maintenance and include grinding out the top layer of asphalt and placing asphalt over it, which should provide for a smoother driving surface. It will also address potholes and cracks on the uppermost part of the roadway.

With all the damage created in recent weeks by the winter weather and plowing, the impact of the pothole Muncy ran over blew out both driver's side tires on Muncy's Mazda hatchback but didn't cause any other significant damage. After shelling out \$500 for a pair of new tires at Big O Tires on Wednesday, Muncy, 56, voiced some frustration with the Idaho Transportation Department for failing to do a better job of alerting drivers about a stretch of highway dotted with potholes.

"Some kind of warning would have been nice, like watch for potholes," he said.

Muncy wasn't the only motorist shopping for new tires and having their vehicle alignment checked at tire stores across the city Wednesday. In Caldwell, repair staff at Les Schwab Tire Center tended to eight vehicles before noon that needed new tires caused by pothole damage.

"We're all hands on deck," said Les Schwab Tire's Caldwell branch manager Tony Malaspina. "Nobody's happy about it."

INTERSTATE CLOSES DOWN FOR POTHOLE REPAIRS WEDNESDAY

With potholes and cracks posing a public safety risk, state transportation officials closed off the westbound lanes of I-84 to focus on filling the gaps and seams exposed by the recent spate of snow, ice and plowing.

For most of the day, traffic headed west was backed up to Garrity Boulevard while transportation crews made repairs between the Franklin Road Exit in Nampa and Caldwell.

Idaho State Police Sgt. Matt Smith said initially only one lane of the interstate was shut down, but officials later decided both westbound lanes needed work.

"There was just too many people standing on the side of the road to change tires," he said. "We truly thought someone would be injured, if not killed."

POTHoles COME AFTER CLEARING SNOW AND ICE ON PRIORITY LIST

During winter storms, ITD's first priority is clearing snow and ice from the roadways. Potholes come after that.

Crews fill potholes with temporary patching material, but consistent moisture can quickly loosen the repair and expose another hole. Only after the potholes are able to dry completely can a more durable patching material be used.

Gonzalez said more repairs for this stretch of the freeway are planned in the coming days, but these repairs are only temporary for an aging roadway initially built and paved in 1965.

“This pavement has reached the end of its life,” she said. “And the weather has pushed it to the point of damage you are seeing today.”

FUNDING SOURCES FOR IMPROVEMENTS NOT YET SOLIDIFIED

But even that project is a short-term fix for a stretch of highway local lawmakers and others have sought to improve and widen to accommodate increased traffic. However, funding a long-term solution remains a stumbling block for legislators.

Earlier this week in his State of the State address, Gov. Butch Otter did not recommend any new spending for transportation projects.

Otter has also signaled he is not interested in renewing the state's surplus eliminator, approved in 2014, with a two-year sunset clause. That mechanism has provided funding for maintenance of state roads and bridges. The surplus eliminator included an increased gas tax.

The governor has suggested a user-pay expense to help fund transportation improvements but hasn't yet expanded on how it would be funded.

Rep. Rick Youngblood, R-Nampa, said it is still unclear how a user-pay system would work.

Youngblood said he's also had problems with potholes while driving this week and sees the demand for change.

While this week's potholes can be attributed to exceptional precipitation, Youngblood hopes to address the stretch of I-84 between Karcher and Franklin in Nampa, widening it to three lanes.

Youngblood, who serves on the House Transportation and Defense Committee, hopes to use GARVEE, or Grant Anticipated Revenue Vehicle, Transportation Program funds.

In the GARVEE program, ITD, in partnership with the Idaho Housing and Finance Association, issues bonds for transportation. Youngblood hopes to find out how much money Housing and Finance has left in the fund and use that funding for Canyon County roads.

He anticipated addressing the issue within the next few weeks of the legislative session.

Rep. Robert Anderst, R-Nampa, said the House still must identify a source of funding for the road improvements, especially now that officials came to a point where they temporarily had to close I-84.

"When the interstate is closed for a period of time, that is further evidence that something needs to be done and we may be running out of time," he said.

Anderst said the stretch of interstate was in need of major overhaul before the storm and nothing has changed in the wake of it.

"I do think it's a priority," he said. "I am open to all possibilities and options."