

Is Kenwood Avenue the worst road in Oregon?

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Kenwood Avenue is an unforgettable street, and not in a good way.

It's more pothole than road at this point.

Located off State Street between Lancaster Avenue and Cordon Road in East Salem, the asphalt on Kenwood looks like it's been shelled by bombs.

The potholes are so big – as large as 10 feet wide – that they are impassable by mortal souls. There are potholes inside potholes. The few feet of asphalt that remain are decent only because they are not potholes.

The people who live on Kenwood are nurses and retirees, mechanics and school children. They're also the most resilient people around; they have to be to live there.

Residents carefully navigate the potholes at about 5 miles per hour like a ship's captain navigating a barge through a reef. They know they can't avoid the potholes, so they drive through the least destructive path.

School buses won't come down the street. On winter mornings, groups of children huddle together at the intersection with State Street to stay warm while waiting to get picked up to go to school.

Residents of Kenwood have been creative in filling the potholes. They've dumped rocks, dirt, bark dust and bags of concrete. At best those fixes last a short time. Inevitably the patches break up and the road becomes worse.

"There's a couple of bricks in a few of them," said Matt Phipps, who has lived on the street about six years.

Anyone who drives down Kenwood Avenue has the same questions: Why is the road this bad? Will it ever be fixed? Is this the worst road in Oregon?

"Everybody that comes here says something. Anybody. A guy comes for the washer and we have to have a discussion about the street," said Christine Davis, who has lived on the road since the early 2000s.

Where is Kenwood Avenue?

Kenwood Avenue starts at State Street and runs about a quarter-mile north. Over 30 homes line the street in that span. It is most easily located by the scary tree at the junction with State Street. The street dead-ends at an undeveloped field.

Vast swaths of East Salem between Interstate 5 and Cordon Road – like Kenwood – are in unincorporated Marion County. Other sections are in Salem's city limits. Kenwood falls under the governance of Marion County.

The benefit to living in an unincorporated street like Kenwood is property taxes are lower than in Salem city limits. Because the residents are not under Salem's jurisdiction, homes on Kenwood are in special districts for services like



Matt Phipps' children stand in a pothole on Kenwood Avenue Northeast on March 9 in Salem.

ABIGAIL DOLLINS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

water, sewer, police and firefighters.

Homes on Kenwood were built between the 1940s and the 1950s, residents say.

"My theory is they built the road in segments," said resident Andrew Davis, Christine's husband. "When they built the first few houses, they built the road. And then they added 10 more houses and built some more road. So that part of the road (toward State Street), I'm guessing, is 20 years older than that part of the road."

The asphalt would be just wide enough for two cars, if somehow two cars could pass on it.

There are no curbs or sidewalks on Kenwood. Somehow there's some sort of storm drain, though no one knows if it's hooked up or does anything.

What makes Kenwood so bad?

The street was "pretty good" when Darrell Sharp bought his house in September 1978.

For decades, he and a neighbor would

purchase bags of "cold patch" – an asphalt filler – and patch their street like a quilt.

"He moved away, and I just kept getting angrier," Sharp said.

It's the only way their street could be fixed.

When the homes on the street were built, Marion County allowed developers to opt to not pay to include their street in the county's roads system. It allowed the developers to sell the houses for lower prices. But it also required homeowners to maintain the road.

"The problem is now you're 50, 60, 70 years later, most of the people living in the neighborhood, you aren't privy to that deal," Marion County Commissioner Colm Willis said.

The people who live there now aren't happy that decision was made. They're paying for it with headaches, car repairs and explanations about how bad their road is.

Marion County Public Works director Brian Nicholas said there are four types

of roads in Marion County: private roads, non-county roads, county roads and state highways.

Kenwood Avenue is a non-county road.

That means residents have the responsibility to maintain it. Many don't find that out until after they move in.

In the two years Sean Smith has lived on Kenwood, he's replaced CV joints, boots, wheel bearings and steering knuckles on his cars. One of his cars is sitting in his driveway because he's afraid it will break if he drives it.

"The developer cut corners by not paying the county to incorporate it with the county, but why can't we fix a wrong from 70 years ago,?" Sean Smith said.

How did the street get this bad?

The street was designed to fail.

The current Marion County standard for building a road is to put in a 12 inch base of aggregate (rock) and four inches

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In the interests of full disclosure, so have I in the distant past.

Access, not ambiance, is the big draw.

The backdrop is urban industrial, the most striking feature being a massive cell phone tower on the east side and the sign on the veteran's clinic to the south across McGilchrist.

The unpaved parking area off 16th is a muddy labyrinth of potholes of indeterminate depth when they fill with rainwater during the winter and into spring.

But, ah, the trout. "The truck came this morning," West said with a smile Monday about the arrival of a tanker from the state's Roaring River Hatchery delivering 1,300 keeper-size (8 inches and slightly larger) rainbow trout to Walling in front about a dozen surprised and delighted anglers.

West already had two on his stringer and was getting fairly steady bites with a soft drizzle falling at midmorning.

He fished with limited success until he got the inside scoop from a fellow dedicated Walling angler several years ago.

"I think it was like until 2016. I caught a catfish and a carp; I never caught a trout. It wasn't like until like two years ago when I started catching them," West said, then chuckled, "by looking at the (trout-stocking) schedules."

His new-found mentor filled in the rest.

"There's a guy here who comes just as much as I do, and I got a lot of advice from him. And he would be the only one catching them even when they're not stocking," West said. "Like green Power-Bait. He doesn't use anything else."

The putty-like fluorescent lime green artificial bait is the bomb, he said.

West stopped talking, nudging the rod he was holding as the slack went out of the line. He missed the fish, though, probably distracted by a columnist.



Walling Pond is just off McGilchrist Street on 16th Street a short drive from almost anywhere in Salem.

After the brief interlude, West picked up the thread again.

"He said just get your green Power-Bait and your bullet weight (a conical slip sinker), add about a foot, a foot and a half of leader, and just cast it out as far

as you can. And just don't touch it; just leave it."

So now you know.

And there are another 1,400 rainbow trout scheduled to arrive at Walling the week of March 21 through 25, if you

want to give it a shot.

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK: A few fish make an urban fishing hole a lot prettier.

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