

Culverts: Expect an increase in road projects in the future

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varying levels of poor conditions. But the issues with those culverts are not as urgent as the ones the state is experiencing, according to data from multiple local public works officials.

Other priorities

Mark Buffington, director of the local ODOT region, said reduced personnel over the years have redirected priorities away from culverts. As a rule of thumb, the department has tended to focus its road maintenance efforts toward the center of roads — which create the most traffic issues — before repairing the edges. But while culverts may be underground, drivers constantly witness their effects when a crack forms that spans the road.

“Generally, crews look for cracks, and there you’ll find a culvert,” Buffington said. “What we’ve discovered over the years is culverts are pretty important to the maintenance of the road.”

When a culvert fails, it can lead to fish-passage issues, as well as safety hazards.

Depending on the severity of the failure and the culvert’s location, ODOT prefers to line the inside of the culvert with plastic, which typically closes a portion of road for a day. If not, the department must replace it, often resulting in multiple weeks of road closure and significantly higher costs.

“It’s really quite complicated to do,” Buffington said.

In late 2015 and early 2016, the transportation department spent roughly \$300,000 for an emergency

replacement of a culvert that collapsed due to a flood, rendering a stretch of state Highway 202 just south of Ordway Lane impassable. The project took weeks to complete, forced drivers to take a lengthy detour along Walluski Loop and created friction between ODOT and neighbors, who were concerned a new culvert would cause the adjacent Youngs River to flood their properties.

Though the new culvert remains in place, effects of the emergency replacement persist.

Deteriorations of two stretches on Walluski Loop Road were expedited by the heavier traffic from the detour. In late June, Clatsop County hired a contractor to pave sections of road at a cost of more than \$114,000.

Long-term effort

Many of the culverts that are failing were installed in the 1950s and 1960s. Decades later, ODOT does not know exactly how many of them lie under their roads. The department is about halfway through a six- to eight-year effort to enter the culverts in an online database using geographic information system mapping, Buffington said.

The state Legislature’s \$5.3 billion transportation bill may also be a step forward, as 30 percent of ODOT’s share will be allocated to pavement preservation and state highway maintenance.

In other words, expect an increase in road projects.

“It’s part of the business,” ODOT spokesman Lou Torres said. “We’re going to impact things. There’s no way around it.”



Markings on a state highway indicate where work on a culvert needs to be performed as efforts to replace aging infrastructure in northwest Oregon has accelerated in recent years.



ABOVE: According to information from the Oregon Department of Transportation, 30 percent of culverts under their highways in northwest Oregon are in poor or failing condition and efforts have accelerated in recent years to replace them. There are 826 culverts under state highways in Clatsop County. LEFT: According to ODOT, many of the culverts that are failing were installed in the 1950s and 1960s and they are unsure just how many there are under highways in northwest Oregon.

Photos by Colin Murphey The Daily Astorian



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