

Why does it take so long to get a road fixed?

In the “old days”, we could get an average project done in a year or less. Now, it might take two or three years for simple projects. Complex projects can take five years or more. Why is this?

Now, more than ever, there is greater interest for the public to be involved in road projects, especially those in their neighborhoods. There is more interest to preserve visual and historic features. This usually calls for public meetings to decide what the project might look like. Organizing meetings and gathering input takes time.

Projects are expensive and funds are limited. If a project costs more than the county has on hand, outside funding must be sought. That may take years. Once a practical project is identified and money found, it must be put on the county transportation plan. Then county officials have to approve it at a public hearing.

Once county officials give the “go-ahead”, permits are needed. More permits and approvals are needed now than in the past. Many permits are environmental in nature. Several state and federal agencies are often involved. Agreeing on permit needs and writing reports for them can take many months. Permits may require building facilities like wetlands to lessen project impacts. These “mitigation facilities” must be designed along with the road project.

More right-of-way is often needed. That is to widen the road, get rid of bad curves, put in new storm water treatment, move utilities, and give safety zones along the roadside. Safety zones help protect people in case they run off the road. Law requires that land owners receive “fair market” offers and have time to consider the offer. If they still don’t want to sell, the county may take them to court to decide the price. Just buying right-of-way can take a lot of time.

Then the road and the surrounding area are accurately surveyed. Detailed engineering maps and plans are prepared. The maps are used as a base to design the improvements. They need to clearly show the contractor what is to be built. The plans need to meet design standards, neighborhood interests, regulatory requirements to protect the environment, and certainly budget limits. Then state and federal law require clear specifications for the project to be bid and built. These assure that contractors are treated fairly and the tax payer gets what was asked for. All of this work can take many months.

After being awarded the project, the successful bidder must fit the project into a schedule. He must order materials — a process that can take several months.

As you can see, the process is often drawn out. The process is also expensive. On the positive side, a project these days is likely to be more environmentally friendly. And it is often closer to what the public expects. We hope the time is worth it and we can all support and even brag about the result.

Don McInnes, P.E., County Engineer
Clallam County

Questions about this article, or any of the series, or on other topics related to County Roads, may be directed either to your County Engineer, or to Al King, P.E., County Road Administration Board, Olympia, at Al@CRAB.Wa.Gov.