

Ruined roads may go gravel

RUSH TOWNSHIP

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RUSH TWP. - Dwayne Nixon gazed toward the crumbling, paper-thin asphalt at the end of his father's driveway and tried to remember when the road was just gravel.

That goes all the back to his early childhood, said Nixon, 49, who grew up in the house on Bingham Road, south of Allan Road. "It looks like this every spring," he said. "Been like this ever since I can remember."

Nixon may see how the road looked when his father, Bill, moved into the house in 1957. The one-mile stretch of Bingham between Henderson and Allan roads is so damaged that the Shiawassee County Road Commission has recommended pulverizing the asphalt and rebuilding the road with gravel. Odd though it seems, some counties have begun reverting paved roads to gravel - temporarily, at least - because it costs too much to repair them. While general construction costs continue to climb, the price of asphalt - a petroleum-based product - has doubled in the past decade. Meanwhile, road revenue has remained the same, said Lonny Latunski, managing director of the road commission.

"We've had no growth whatsoever in income," Latunski said. "There's no sun on the horizon, either." Even so, Latunski said he was a little surprised to learn that Gratiot, Kent and Ionia already have either begun grinding up bad roads and maintaining them as gravel or might do so this spring. "We're not quite in that position," he said. "But with the current funding situation, it could very easily happen in other areas." Road officials in Genesee, Lapeer and Tuscola counties said they have no plans to go down that road. But with maintenance costs rising, returning paved roads to gravel will become a more attractive option

"We really don't want to do that, but if worse comes to worst, a gravel surface is much easier to maintain than an asphalt surface," said Richard Hill, design department manager for the Genesee County Road Commission. "It's something that we have out there as a possible option." While asphalt prices have skyrocketed, at least some agencies have benefited from a highly competitive bidding environment. Contractors hungry for work are covering some of the increases in material costs, road officials said. "We're actually paying \$2 a ton less than we did last year," said Rick Pearson, managing director of the Lapeer County Road Commission. "We have more people bidding the jobs out there than we ever have." Swartz Creek City Manager Paul Bueche said the city is seeing good bid prices as it moves ahead with larger road projects, but it can't give local streets enough attention.

"We've looked at that option for local streets, simply because we don't have the money to repair them," he said, referring to gravel. "If we don't repave them, that's what happens naturally." In

Shiawassee County, a section of road was returned to gravel a few years ago because no money was available to repave it, Latunski said. The road commission is proposing to do the same with Bingham Road, parts of which essentially are gravel.

In some places, the road bed is nothing but overlapping, peeling layers of patch material, In others, dirt and gravel lay at the bottom of sinkhole-like depressions surrounded by crumbling asphalt. "Large sections are breaking up into marble-size pieces, and there's no real way to fix it," Latunski said. "The actual cross-section gets so beat up that the only way to fix it is to grind it up and reset the grade."

Local governments pay the majority of local road projects. And township officials aren't sure if they want to pulverize Bingham Road this year or wait until next year to repair it, he said.
