

Feeling the pain of potholes

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Auto repair shops have bumper year for repairs thanks to rough roads

You can add one more thing to the list of why you don't like this year's protracted visit by winter — the proliferation of potholes.

The bone-jarring craters in the pavement can be much more than a minor aggravation for motorists.

The ravages of the freezing and thawing cycle on asphalt and concrete have kept local auto repair shops busy.



“We always get plenty of business because of potholes this time of year, but this winter has definitely been worse than usual,” said Steve Peterson, shop manager at Tires Unlimited in Port Washington.

An ill-timed crash into a pothole can cause a litany of problems for a vehicle, Peterson said.

“If you hit one at the right speed, you can burst a tire or break a belt inside the tire, which leaves a big bulge,” he said.

“That especially happens with the newer cars that have really thin sidewalls. The low profile tires look nice on the car, but they can't handle potholes very well.”

The cost of replacing a tire depends on the driver's brand preference, but can easily cost several hundred dollars.

Beyond the tires, Peterson said, his shop has replaced plenty of steel tire rims dented by a pothole encounter.

In the worst case, the shop had to place a special order for a replacement wheel for a Mercedes-Benz from the vehicle manufacturer.

The price tag — \$1,500.

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Motorists can end up facing even higher bills if a vehicle's suspension or exhaust system is damaged. Steering alignment can also be knocked out of whack by a pothole jolt.

Peterson said most of the customers pay the cost out of their own pockets.

"We have very few insurance claims because so many people are carrying higher deductibles that do not exceed the repair costs," he said.

As a rule of thumb, Peterson said, most vehicle damage is caused when potholes are hit at a high rate of speed.

"If you are in town and driving at 25 mph to 30 mph, there usually isn't much damage. If you are on the highway and hit a pothole at 45 mph or 55 mph, you can do a lot of damage to your vehicle," he said.

Unfortunately, Peterson said, there really isn't a safe size for potholes — one that is so insignificant it isn't a threat to a vehicle.

"If you can do it safely, I would always suggest drivers avoid hitting them," he said.

The story is much the same at Eddie's Service in Saukville.

Owner Paul Krauska said the biggest impact potholes have had on his business is reflected in the amount of money customers have spent on suspension work.

Checking his records, Krauska said, during the first three months of last year customers spent about \$10,000 to adjust vehicle suspensions. During that same period of time this year, nearly \$42,000 has been spent on suspension work.

Adding to the misery of customers, Krauska said, is the increasing cost of salvaged parts.

"You used to be able to buy used tire rims for one-third the cost of new ones. The prices are a lot closer now, so we can't pass those savings on to customers," he said.

Another indication of the ravages of potholes, Krauska said, is the number of single tires purchased because of bursts or failed treads.

"I remember a case where a customer bought a set of new tires in November and then had to replace a burst tire in January," he said.

The financial pinch can be minimized by purchasing a hazard insurance with new tires, Krauska said.

"It may cost \$20 more, but replacing a tire can easily cost \$100. Customers say they are on a tight budget and can't afford it, but you tell me if they are really saving money by not getting the insurance?" he said.

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Image information: TECHNICIAN LEON DEMGE worked on the alignment on a vehicle at Tires Unlimited in Port Washington on Monday. Photo by Mark Jaeger