

Wallowa County Road Department Memo

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The Wallowa County Road Department holds jurisdiction over more than 700 miles of roads, comprising three different road surfaces – dirt, gravel, and asphalt. Many of these roads were constructed over a century ago, with a significant number dating back to the late 1800's. At that time, roads were “cut” into the surface. Cutting a road consisted of clearing brush and trees, then plowing the roadway out of the dirt and rock. These roads had little to no engineering and sat at or near the same level as the surrounding ground. They were not built up to hold and maintain a surface, as modern roads are constructed. Wallowa County has nearly 100 miles of roads that are still in this natural condition.

As knowledge, equipment, and funding improved, roads began to be engineered. Rather than being simply a way to get from Point A to Point B, roadways became structured features of the landscape. Camber, barrow ditches and culverts, and road crown were configured to drain road

surfaces and help prevent washouts and flooding. Roads were elevated rather than just running on the native surface. And the road surfaces changed. Rock and gravel were used as base and final surface layers, giving a more stable running surface that sustained less damage and required less maintenance than the old “cut” roads. The vast majority (461 miles) of Wallowa County roads remain gravel-surfaced.

More heavily used, primary roadways are now paved with asphalt. Asphalt is a semi-solid form of petroleum. It is a carefully calculated mix of aggregates (rock), binder (asphalt or tack oil), and filler, which provides a much more durable running surface than gravel. This allows for faster speeds and heavier vehicles even as it requires less maintenance. Wallowa County currently has 117 miles of paved roads, not including the State highways, which are maintained by the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT).

The Wallowa County Road Department, at its height, had 22 employees on the road crew. The Department still has responsibility for the same 700+ miles of roads, but with a current crew less than half the size. These eight employees grade roads, plow snow, sand and gravel icy roads; repair bridges; chip seal, and repair potholes; post bridge and road signs as required by State laws; replace damaged and stolen road signs; clean out ditches and culverts; maintain the County’s fleet of six dump/plow trucks, seven road graders and various other equipment; assist with vegetation control within the road Right-of-Way, as well as other duties as required. As more housing is constructed in outlying/remote areas of the County, there is now more traffic in those areas. This often includes mail and school bus routes. These roads require more time and attention than they have in the past.

The majority of the County’s funding for road maintenance has historically come from Federal timber sales and State fuel tax receipts. Both of these revenue streams have decreased by almost 50% over the last 10 years. Additional funding comes from Keep Oregon Moving (motor fuels tax, title and registration fees, weight-mile tax on heavy trucks, ‘privilege tax’ on new vehicles, employee payroll (transit) tax and a \$15 purchase tax on bicycles costing \$200 or more) and the Federal Surface Transportation Block Grant (STBG) Fund Exchange Program. The Road Department **does not** receive any revenue from property taxes. There are also opportunities to apply for grants that go to specific projects, such as the Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP) grant. It was a FLAP grant, through the Federal Highway Authority, that funded the recent improvements to the Wallowa Mountain Loop Road.

The Road Department has a long-range plan for addressing the greatest needs on our roads over the next five years. These projects will take time, and not all projects can be completed at once but may need to be revisited over a period of time. We ask for the public’s patience while we diligently work through the process to bring the roads up to the standards we would like to see.