

The Road to Hell is, Well, Hellish

Written by Alex Baer
Sunday, 05 August 2012 15:40

We've all heard the *Road to Hell* is paved with good intentions. Except that it's not. The road to Hell is hellacious. It's not even paved. It's chip-sealed.

Three days ago, I'd never so much as heard the term. That was before our few-mile-long access road was invaded by a D-Day armada of construction vehicles and a herd of dinosaur-sized trucks filled with gravel.

Our road was tarred and our little world rocked -- literally. Now, I am certain of the decline of the American empire. There had not been much lingering doubt.

This unexceptional chip-sealing process, for use in this land of *American exceptionalism*, involves laying down a lane or so of hot, fluid asphalt -- tar, more or less -- on top of an old asphalt road that's been prepped-and-swept, then immediately topping it with gravel that's gone through a wash-and-dry cycle.

The tar is the seal. Adding the clean gravel is the "chip" part of the equation. If it helps, imagine rainbow sprinkles or chocolate jimmies smooshed down into really thin frosting.

Then, a multi-tired roller -- in this case, a Hamm GRW-5, if we have any road construction groupies or junkies in the house -- goes back and forth a few times, tamping things down, trying to convince the gravel it's content where it is, making sure it clings and holds on.

A metal-rollered machine -- we used to call them steamrollers, even after steam power had been long abandoned -- clangs and bongs back and forth a few times, too, for good measure.

In a few hours, a sweeper goes by, brushing off and collecting loose rock. This process is repeated a couple times over the next few days, with an assortment of vehicles with brushes mounted this way and that, using polishing and overhand approaches.

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Variations on this general theme involve following this scheme for laying an initial roadbed, or even topping the completed business with another layer of asphalt called, for whatever reason, a fog seal.

(This is a good place to stop and yawn, shedding any accidental fog of your own that I have accidentally managed to induce.)

The reason this tactic is employed? Yes, it's our old friend money, once again, as it always is, when some baseline of expected quality goes through a trapdoor and an inferior item or situation is substituted.

The states are broke, of course -- spin the random-assignment wheel for a specific cause, if you like. There are dozens of reasons posted. They range from Teabaggers and Libertarians on crack who believe others should pay for the services they use, through the Republican caused-and-maintained Depression, through the incineration of three trillion dollars in endless and meaningless wars. *Step right up! Spin the big wheel!*

So, yes, we've made our roadbed and now, we'll have to sleep-drive on it -- except this one will jar you awake. We've been building this road to Hell for the past 25 years, one piece of gravel at a time, no plan to pave it -- not with good intentions, not with hope, but with ignorance, apathy, and leftovers of attention.

Back on the road again: Chip-sealing costs one quarter to a fifth as much as a regular old asphalt or cement road. The rough, bumpy surface, a bit jagged, is supposed to cut incidents of black ice. That's in the column for good. And cheap.

Some of the down side: It doesn't last as long as a regular road, so we'll get to do this again and again. It's also hell on cyclists' tires, frames, and kneecaps, and not much favor to any other two-wheeler.

It's a lot louder to use, inside the vehicle and out. Initial test drives conjure up sensations of driving on 55-gallon firecrackers, pop rocks (remember those?) the size of ottomans, and

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crisped-rice cereal bits as big as recliners.

Increased noise always works for Americans, almost always Republicans, who are the original noise (not job) creators. The same goes for fans of muffler removal from pickup trucks one enters from the third floor.

Another selling point on this downslope: There is more tire wear for all vehicles with this sort of road, and a heck of a lot more shaking and vibration. That means more business for tire, repair and other auto and truck shops, especially as people need to replace stuff that falls off.

There's also much more loose rock flying around in the air, trying to double for M60 rounds -- should be a windfall bonus for windshield replacers in the area. (*Saaaay...* Maybe we should check out what businesses are owned by road commissioners in this county, you know?)

The chip-seal technique is supposed to be used only and exclusively on low-volume country roads, but I see from a few minutes of searching online that Pennsylvania, and some other states, are no longer able to stick to that rule of engineering thumb, owing to budget woes.

The redder your state or area, the more likely you are to see this technique arrive. Some spots have employed it for 20 or more years, so our blue state (but sunburnt-red area) is late to this rock-and-let-the-weird-times-roll party.

If Republicans, and all their astroturf branches, get their way, look for this stuff to show up on freeways and airport landing strips -- anywhere we can save a few short-term bucks, no matter how dire the long-term costs.

Big orange signs: **Fresh Oil. Flying Rocks. 25 MPH.**

Happy motoring! □ Bon voyage! □ Bonne chance! □ Bon courage! □ Welcome to Hell!