ROAD REPAIRS GET DETOURED, CONTRACTORS SAY

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By Andrew J. Dabilis

From Charlestown's gutted Main Street, a graveyard for mufflers, to rutty Route 6 in Fall River and bumpy Route 2 in the Berkshires, highway contractors say large portions of Massachusetts' 30,000 miles of road are in poor condition.

While many roads are in adequate shape, some highways are battered from heavy traffic, and side streets can be found that are split open from the force of water and salt in their seams. "They are as bad as they have ever been," said Richard McCourt, a highway builder who is also chairman of the Board of Construction Industries of Massachusetts, made up of contractors who do most of the roadwork in the state.

While New England's vicious weather cycle -- sizzling heat in summer alternating with winter's deep freeze -- and years of grinding auto and truck traffic have taken their toll, they're not the main problem, according to McCourt.

He pointed instead at what he said is the failure of state and local governments to overcome political and union squabbles, and bureaucratic inertia to push through badly needed repairs.

"There's been no consistent maintenance program," said McCourt. "The roads get worse every year. We fall farther and farther behind."

Robert Tierney, commissioner of the state Department of Public Works, said the 10 percent of highway miles in the state that are under his agency's control "are in very good shape. I don't believe you can find a pothole." He agreed, however, that many city and town roads are badly maintained. He said his department is an easy scapegoat and is often blamed for local road problems.

Contractors agree that local roads are in worse shape, but they said state roads have problems, too.

On a recent tour of both state and local roads in eastern Massachusetts, McCourt pointed out numerous areas where roads had potholes, cracks or a roller-coaster effect that had caused many vehicles to leave scrapes from their bottoms on the hot top. "Look at this road," he said, pointing at cracks and a wavy surface on Newport Road in Quincy. "Why does it have to be like this?"

McCourt put most of the blame on Gov. Dukakis for not putting sufficient emphasis on highway repair and on reform of the DPW. The agency has a work force whose average age is 57. It is trying to rebuild itself from budget cuts that

drove out most of the young engineers three years ago. [CLARIFICATION: Also, a spokesman for state Transporation Secretary Frederick Salvucci said budget cuts that reduced staffing at the state Department of Public Works were initiated by former Gov. Edward J. King, although the effects reached into the Dukakis administration.]

Money is not the problem, most observers agree. State funds distributed to cities and towns for road repair under the Chapter 90 highway program have increased from $12 million in 1983 to $30 million this year, according to state Secretary of Transportation and Construction Frederick Salvucci. But he said results will not show for a few years because of the lead time required for these projects. It costs $100 per foot to repair roads in Massachusetts, and some can cost up to $2.5 million per mile.ld not get through the Legislature.

The DPW provides design and environmental review for most road repair and construction projects in the state, including most local roads. The process, said Tierney, is arduous. "I'd have to be an idiot to say I'm satisfied," he said.

A 1982 survey done for Construction Industries of Massachusetts by the industry-backed Road Information Project in Washington said that nearly 22,000 road miles in the state were in "fair" to "very poor" condition and that repairs would cost about $5 billion. A year later, the Legislature approved a major highway bond issue that promised to substantially beef up the DPW's work force. The DPW won authority to hire 200 junior engineers without going through the civil service system and was allowed to begin new hiring that has increased its staff from 2,700 in 1983 to 3,500 this year.

But highway contractors say that it still takes months for the DPW to review and approve state and local road design contracts and that the agency is bogged down by union regulations and the lack of qualified staff.

McCourt, while acknowledging that his members would benefit from the lucrative highway contracts, said nonetheless that "the governor has to direct his people as to what's a priority, and in this administration, roads are not a priority. He's too convinced mass transit will solve the problem."

Salvucci said that "physically the roads are reasonably good. The towns have a problem. There is a capacity problem to spend money effectively."

House Minority Leader William G. Robinson (R-Melrose), a candidate for state auditor, says DPW progress in processing paperwork on local roads and repairing state roads has been so slow that Massachusetts will have to return $74 million in unspent federal highway funds. [CLARIFICATION: Contrary to a legislator's complaint quoted in the Sunday Globe's Metro/Region section, $74 million in highway funds that Massachusetts must return to the federal government was not for routine highway repairs. Rather, the money was

earmarked for Boston's third harbor tunnel and central artery projects.] The federal government subsidizes state and local highway construction projects from between 75 to 90 percent.

"All across the state, bridges and roads are disintegrating not because of a lack of funds, but because the Dukakis administration has missed the deadline for spending available funds for these repairs," Robinson said. DPW officials said the money technically will revert to the federal government but will still be available to the state later.

The Massachusetts branch of the American Automobile Association, long an agitator over traffic and road problems, stated in a recent issue of its magazine that the DPW had promised to break last year's record of advertising bids for $268 million worth of work, but had awarded contracts for less than $73 million by mid-July.

Tierney said that's because several expensive projects weren't scheduled for approval until this fall. He said the department may still hit the $300 million mark in contracts that he had predicted in January. A major reason for the state's statistically poor performance, said Salvucci, is the delay in waiting for approval for a third harbor tunnel between Boston and Logan Airport and for depressing the Central Artery. The two projects would cost at least $2 billion.

Last New Year's Eve, the Legislature approved a $1.96 billion highway bond issue, including federal funds. About $800 million is for highway and bridge work, $400 million each for 1986 and 1987. The House chairman of the Legislature's Transportation Committee, Rep. Stephen J. Karol (D-Attleboro), said that Tierney has tried hard to speed work at the DPW but that the agency is antiquated.

"The DPW and its organizational structure hasn't changed appreciably in 50 years. It can't get out enough work to meet the needs. We shouldn't ever do another bond issue unless we can do a major reorganization of the DPW. The single most critical issue is the lack of engineering capacity in the DPW," Karol said.

"You have an institutional tradition of mediocrity. There are many dedicated people there, but there are some people called engineers because they took a mechanical drawing course in high school," Karol said. "There are a lot of people down there on cruise control looking for retirement, and the job isn't getting done.