

Road Sleuth

Myths & Facts Revealed



Photos taken by WV LTAP staff.

Myth: It can't cost that much to pave.

Rough and bumpy roads in need of repair are very frustrating for drivers. The public often thinks that road agencies have a surplus of money they can use to pave roads or that it cannot really cost that much to make repairs. However, paving is an expensive process, and both state and local road agencies have large areas of pavement to maintain with limited budgets.

One common method that roadway agencies use to restore roadways is called overlaying, which involves adding a new surface onto old pavement to restore the road. Overlaying a road is not a cheap endeavor; in large part, due to trans-

portation costs in getting material to the job site and because asphalt binder (the black sticky stuff) is made from petroleum. Production of the binder was once seen as a good way to use the waste from refining oil, but today, this material is refined into plastics more often than asphalt. In fact, only about 25% of oil refineries currently produce asphalt. Since asphalt binder is made from oil, its price fluctuates with the price at the pump.

So how much does it cost to pave a road? A West Virginia Division of Highway's (WVDOH) paving project on a single 12-foot wide lane with a typical 2-inch overlay costs approximately \$100,000 per lane mile. This cost does not include milling (grinding down) the old pavement surface, which is needed for the new pavement to properly adhere. In fact, milling alone adds approximately \$25,000 to the overlay price per lane mile. The WVDOH maintains over 90% (72,000 lane miles) of the roads in West Virginia. To put a 2-inch overlay on just 20% of these roads would cost over \$1.5 billion!

The cost for a West Virginia municipal agency paving project, assuming 12-foot wide lanes and a 1.5 inch overlay, is closer to \$60,000 per lane mile. The cause for the large difference in price is partly because West Virginia municipalities tend to apply a 1.5 inch overlay while the state uses a 2-inch overlay; the WVDOH also tends to use higher performance asphalt than municipal agencies. The 2-inch overlay and higher performance asphalt are used so the roads can handle the greater volumes and weights of traffic typically experienced on state routes.

With roadway agencies facing stagnant or decreasing budgets, fewer roadways can be paved. Whether it's a state owned, city owned, or even privately owned road, paving is expensive. Roadway agencies work hard to prioritize their paving and repair needs; unfortunately, the needs often far exceed the funds.