

POTHOLES & PRIORITIES: COUNTY ROAD CONDITIONS



SUMMARY

This report was prompted by an internal investigation conducted by the San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury concerning county road conditions, with specific interest on road conditions in the Los Osos area.

The Department of Public Works (DPW) maintains the roads in the unincorporated area of San Luis Obispo County. The Grand Jury recognizes the variable nature of the funding base for road maintenance and repair and the current worsening financial environment. The measure of road section quality used by the County is the Pavement Condition Index – ratings made by an external consultant. The Index value at which maintenance is deemed appropriate is 70, on a scale of 0 to 100. The Grand Jury found that for a number of the communities in the unincorporated area, the *average* value of the Index over the road sections is less than that target value. Of particular concern are the roads within the heavily populated Los Osos community, which continue to deteriorate while awaiting a decision to construct the Los Osos sewer project.

METHOD

As part of its fact finding and investigation, the Grand Jury:

- Reviewed a presentation provided by the County Department of Public Works.
- Reviewed information on the Pavement Condition Index report supplied by the Department of Public Works.
- Reviewed the priority list for road improvements for the current fiscal year.
- Reviewed road improvement lists for the three prior fiscal years.
- Interviewed political representatives of the Board of Supervisors.
- Interviewed representatives of the County Department of Public Works.

NARRATIVE

The County Department of Pubic Works (DPW) administers the County Roads Program (Program) and is responsible for the overall condition of all roads in the unincorporated area of the county. County road conditions are reviewed on a rotating three-year cycle with one third of the county roads rated each year. DPW uses an outside consultant to perform the annual review of the County's road conditions. That consultant in turn assigns a Pavement Condition Index (PCI) to each road section. The PCI ratings for each road are on a scale from zero to 100 points. The stated goal of DPW is to maintain all county roads at a PCI of 70 level or higher. Roads falling below a PCI of 70 are prioritized as candidates for maintenance, paving or improvement. The Grand Jury was provided with an inventory of all county roads and the corresponding PCI index assigned to each road section. The inventory includes the road name, section evaluated, the inspection date, the PCI index and an overall condition rating from "Serious/poor" to "Best". This inventory is the basis for prioritizing pavement repairs and allocating the available funding in each fiscal year of the DPW budget. Other factors in the prioritization process include designation as a collector, arterial or rural highway, traffic counts, population, accident history and liability concerns.

The Grand Jury was also given an informative presentation describing the Program which included average PCI for the ten population centers in the unincorporated area of the county. The presentation also made it clear that the funding available to the county for road maintenance and repair – from County General Funds as well as State and Federal sources - varies significantly from year to year. Up to and including the current fiscal year, funding for the program has been “good,” according to a DPW official. This is no longer the case and is not likely to be so for some time.

Overall, county maintained roads are generally well managed. However, the Grand Jury noted the **average** pavement condition indices for the communities of Shandon, Santa Margarita, and San Miguel is quite low. Nipomo and Cambria are close to the stated index goal, while Oceano and Los Osos are rated between these two levels. (See Table 1) DPW officials said the community of San Miguel’s roads have recently been significantly improved with the reconstruction of its main street, and in Shandon and Santa Margarita it will be relatively easy to improve the average PCI because they don’t have many traffic lane miles. Oceano, and Los Osos are rated below the stated goal of a PCI of 70 and are densely populated. They are of major concern of the Grand Jury for pavement maintenance and improvement. According to Public Works officials, Oceano should enjoy maintenance and improvements in coming fiscal programs. **In the case of Los Osos, which is one of the most densely populated areas in the unincorporated area as well as the second largest in total population very few roads in the area have been improved during the last three fiscal years. No improvements are included in the current fiscal year.** The DPW officials explained that the delay in maintenance or improvements in Los Osos are the result of the much anticipated sewer project and the conclusion that it did not make fiscal sense to repair or improve streets that may then be torn up to install sewer lines.

Table 1: Population and Average Road Conditions of Communities

Area	Population	Average PCI	PCI Rank
Nipomo	16,609	67	4
Los Osos	14,351	64	7
Oceano	7,228	65	6
Cambria	6,232	66	5
Templeton	4,687	69	3
Cayucos	2,943	73	2
San Miguel	1,427	53	8
Santa Margarita	1,340	43	10
Shandon	986	47	9
Avila Beach	797	84	1

The list of streets/roads provided to the Grand Jury for the Los Osos area includes individual road PCI ratings as recorded by surveys in August 2005, November 2006, and October 2007. Of the 179 road sections listed for Los Osos, 48% were rated below the PCI goal of 70. Of those, 27% were rated in the two lowest categories, "serious/poor" or "fair" and are in need of immediate repair. The Grand Jury noted that Fifteenth Street and two blocks of Eleventh Street were the only streets/roads improved in the past three years.

While the Grand Jury understands the reason for the delayed improvements, we are also concerned that the long and complex nature of the Los Osos sewer project, which has been ongoing for more than a decade, does not have an immediate or even targeted date of completion. Without placing blame on the many participants in the long political saga of the Los Osos sewer issue, the Grand Jury believes it is unreasonable to ignore the continuing deterioration of the roads in Los Osos. Doing so exposes a community of over 14,000 residents

to sub-standard road conditions while the design and decision process of the Los Osos sewer project grinds on without a foreseeable completion date.

The Grand Jury notes the increasing cost of pavement maintenance as time advances and neglect continues. The attached graphs (Appendix A & B) show the increasing cost of non-maintained roads and pavement life cycle costs. The Grand Jury believes it is not prudent long-term fiscal policy to neglect road maintenance. Years of continued neglect will only increase the county's future budget obligations. This is true for all areas, not just the community of Los Osos.

In the case of Los Osos, there are several lower cost alternatives to consider given the significant road deterioration and the uncertain future of the Los Osos sewer project. Information supplied by DPW shows that "crack seal," "fog seal," "chip seal" and "slurry seal" are good short term road maintenance programs that are much less costly than "overlay" or "total rehabilitation" which have a much longer life.

The Grand Jury noted during the period of investigation for this report that maintenance in the form of street patching has recently been applied to Pine Ave and many other streets in Los Osos. The patch work is excellent quality and the Grand Jury commends the DPW for responding to the concerns for the area.

The residents of Los Osos --- as well as residents throughout the unincorporated areas of the county --- deserve to be advised of any further planned road improvements in their area, what to expect as to final road conditions after the sewer project is completed, and have an easy method to report further unsatisfactory road conditions.

FINDINGS

1. The County Roads Program is well managed and the pavement condition index (PCI) is a useful tool for prioritizing road maintenance and repair expenditures in the annual county budget.
2. The funding base for the Program varies from year to year, which will cause fluctuations in the overall condition of county roads.

3. The communities of Shandon, and Santa Margarita have very low average PCI ratings and are in need of road improvements.
4. The communities of San Miguel, Oceano, Cambria, and Nipomo have higher average PCI than Shandon or Santa Margarita but are still rated below 70.
5. The Los Osos area has deteriorating road conditions due to the reluctance of the County to improve roads that may subsequently be impacted by the proposed Los Osos sewer project.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The County should focus road improvements in those areas of the county that have average PCI values below the stated PCI goal of 70. Specifically, Santa Margarita, Shandon, San Miguel, Cambria, Oceano, Nipomo, and Los Osos need attention.
2. The County should increase the priority of road maintenance and improvement in the Los Osos area and maintain those roads on a comparable priority basis with all other county roads. Relatively short term maintenance processes such as crack seal, fog seal, slurry seal, chip seal and patching should be used in Los Osos until a more permanent program is established after the sewer project is completed.
3. The Board of Supervisors should designate the county roads budget as one of its highest budget priorities. Locally, as well as nationally, the condition of our infrastructure is essential for public safety, quality of life and a stable fiscal future.
4. All County residents should be advised of planned road improvements in their area on an annual basis. County residents should be provided with an easy telephone complaint register with an easy alpha sequence number such as "POT HOLE" (768-4653) or "BAD ROAD" (223-7623), as well as an email complaint form for similar purposes to add to the existing DPW website.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

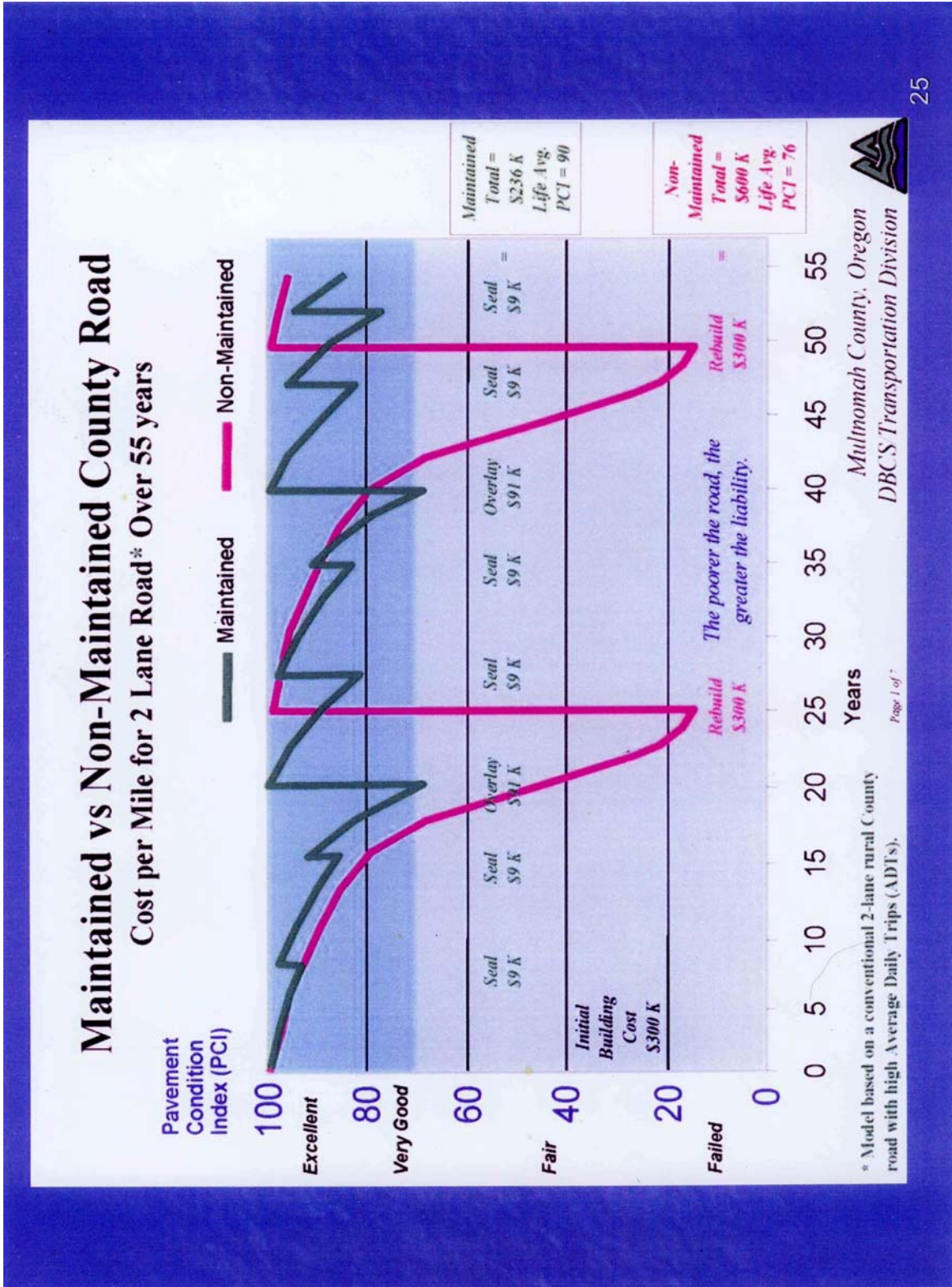
The San Luis Obispo County Department of Public Works is required to respond to Findings 1, 2, 3 and 4 and Recommendations 1, 2 and 4. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge at the San Luis Obispo Superior court by **August 14, 2009**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors is required to respond to Recommendation 3. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge at the San Luis Obispo Superior court by **September 13, 2009**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The mailing addresses for delivery are:

Presiding Judge	Grand Jury
Presiding Judge Martin Tangeman Superior Court of California 1035 Palm, Room 385 San Luis Obispo, CA 93408	San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury P.O. Box 4910 San Luis Obispo, CA 93403

APPENDIX A



APPENDIX B

