

Holes In The System: When Your City Isn't Fixing Potholes

The New England Center for Investigative Reporting

By Naomi LaChance and Brooke Williams

Posted: 08/13/2015 06:58 AM EDT



NEW ENGLAND CENTER FOR INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

New England Center for Investigative Reporting

The following story was reported by Naomi LaChance and Brooke Williams of the [New England Center for Investigative Reporting](http://www.necir.org) and published here in collaboration with [The Huffington Post](http://www.huffingtonpost.com). NECIR works to hold the powerful accountable and train a new generation of investigative reporters. Visit their website at [necir.org](http://www.necir.org) and follow them at [@necirbu](https://twitter.com/necirbu).

The hole in the street was not only deep, it was camouflaged with newly laid asphalt. It was easy to imagine one of the many North End residents and tourists walking down the narrow street next to the Paul Revere Mall, stepping into it and spraining their ankle – or worse.

Boston's Public Works Interim Commissioner Michael Dennehy, his deputy, Michael Brohel, and a spokeswoman for the mayor's office had just been to the street to show reporters how crews repair potholes. But about an hour and a half after they filled this one, it had [caved in](#). The bottom was only visible with a flashlight.

It turns out, Boston has a habit of implying potholes have been fixed when they haven't, according to an examination by the New England Center for Investigative Reporting of the city system called [Citizens Connect](#) – an award-winning mobile app and website meant to increase transparency and accountability in government. A sampling of 78 cases found nearly half reported closed did not meet the city guidelines for fixing potholes.

Map: Boston closes cases without filling potholes

NECIR found dozens of examples where the City of Boston implied potholes had been fixed when they hadn't. Click on a point in the map above for more details, including a photo of each pothole after the city marked its case "closed." (Data: [Data Boston](#); Brooke Williams and Naomi LaChance, NECIR / Map: Cory Dawson for NECIR)

"That's unacceptable," Dennehy said. "I think we need to revisit how we close cases."

Despite repeated requests to interview Dennehy to discuss findings at his office, where he would have access to records, the mayor's office would only agree to an interview with NECIR and its reporting partner, [New England Cable News](#), outside and next to a pothole being repaired.

About an hour and a half later, after the interview, NECIR and NECN reporters walked past one of the potholes the crews had just filled. It had caved in at least a foot.

Charlie Frates, 48, who lives in Acushnet and was doing construction nearby, laughed in dismay as he looked at the large cave-in.

"If I did work like that for my company, I'd be fired," he said.

In a joint investigation with NECN, NECIR found that 48 percent of potholes the city said were repaired were not. (Video: NECN)

Crews came back and repaired the pothole again, this time ensuring its depths were filled.

After the record snowfall this year, potholes pepper many city roads, making walking, biking and driving a sometimes treacherous proposition.

The city says it engages with constituents and fixes potholes with efficiency and ease, thanks to Citizens Connect. But some of the potholes city workers mark as fixed are still dangerous. On several days in May, June and July, NECIR examined 78 pothole cases recently reported closed and found 18 had not been repaired. In 22 other cases, crews had filled a pothole but left others untouched at the same location – a direct violation of city protocol, explained Dennehy. Workers are expected to fix all the potholes at a particular location, he said, not just the one that was reported.

In response to NECIR's questions, Dennehy ordered a meeting of supervisors on July 15 to discuss flaws in the system. Despite the issues, he said, he has confidence in his staff. He said he thinks the pothole reporting system works well the majority of the time.

Pothole maintenance is a source of pride for the city. In Mayor Martin Walsh's [State of the City](#) address in January, he said: "We paved more than 60 miles of roads [in 2014] and filled over 19,000 potholes – 50% more than in 2013." The

Boston Globe later [reported](#) that these numbers were questionable.

Dennehy told NECIR the city has repaired about 9,000 potholes since January. He said a pothole is considered repaired when crews close the case and mark it “resolved.” In some cases, crews determine a pothole is on a state road or in another agency's jurisdiction and reportedly refer it to the appropriate unit. [But they still mark some of these cases as “closed” on the Citizens Connect website](#), which is confusing to people who assume that “closed” means repaired.

[READ MORE FROM NECIR: Compounding tragedy, FEMA fails to adapt to climate change](#)

On Truman Parkway in Hyde Park, for instance, city crews closed a pothole case on Thursday, June 18. But on the following Monday, there was no sign they'd paid [the hazard](#) any notice.

“It's right there,” said Joe Pelosi, looking at the pothole in front of a house where he was doing landscaping. “I think that they're just playing games.”

Dennehy said when a DPW crew closed the case on Truman Parkway, they didn't repair it because the road belongs to the state Department of Conservation and Recreation. He said they should have alerted DCR, but he couldn't find documentation that they did.

Case closed, but not fixed

It seems no neighborhood is spared, from the North End to Hyde Park and from Brighton to Roxbury.

On West Canton Street in the South End, crews had fixed a few potholes but left others that were [just as large and hazardous](#) in front of the same address. On an afternoon in June, 50-year-old Doug Gifford, an IT consultant who lives on the street, stood outside with his dog and assessed the remaining potholes.

“It's frustrating to see tax money be used inefficiently,” he said.

Laura Oggeri, spokeswoman for the mayor, said “there can be a number of reasons that contribute to this not being possible, ranging from running out of materials or time, or something physically being in the way – such as a car or delivery truck being parked over any potholes.”

On Revere, a one-way street in Beacon Hill, crews [fixed](#) a pothole. Then, in order to leave the street, they had to drive over dozens of dangerous holes in the road. They [left them untouched](#). On Commercial Street in the North End, crews responded to a complaint Dennehy said he submitted himself, [reporting a pothole](#) around a manhole cover. Crews [repaired](#) that crevice beautifully but left a [sea of severe potholes](#) surrounding it.

In response to an email the night of July 8 asking about the potholes left behind on Commercial Street, Juli Hanscom, a spokeswoman for the Office of the Mayor, said the crew “ran out of hot top to finish the entire job,” and that “they returned, and made sure that the job was complete when they had more hot top.”

They did return – but not until the morning following a reporter's email asking about it. This was seven business days after the Interim Commissioner first reported the pothole.

[#Holesinthesystem: Help NECIR report on Boston's pothole repairs](#)

The above map shows every pothole the city of Boston claims to have fixed in the month prior to July 15. While NECIR's investigation reveals many holes in the system, they need your help to get the full picture. Click on the map

to report a pothole problem in your area. (Data: [Data Boston](#) / Map: Brooke Williams, Naomi LaChance and Cory Dawson, NECIR)

In some instances, NECIR found crews had called cases “closed,” “resolved” and “done” after simply placing an orange cone on top of the hole.

On the corner of Beacon and Arlington Streets, for instance, there was a [hole about 2 feet deep](#) in the asphalt alongside the curb and next to a crosswalk. Someone [reported](#) the hazard to the city on June 24. On June 25, after the city reported fixing it, there were no signs of repair, but there were [three traffic cones](#) placed around the hole on the busy street.

City crews closed the case and reported: “Case Resolved. placed safety cone over sink hole.”

Later that day, someone [filed another complaint](#), this time including a photo of the hole between two cones. City contractors did not repair it until June 29, according to the report.

“This case was closed inappropriately,” Oggeri said in an email. “PWD standard operating procedure is that work must be completed before a case can be closed out.”

[READ MORE FROM NECIR: Despite decreased emissions, mercury levels in Massachusetts fish remain dangerously high](#)

New tech, old problems

When the city introduced Citizens Connect, it was meant to take “[transparency and government to a whole new level](#) . The website and mobile application, along with the mayor’s 24-hour-hotline, allow constituents to make requests. They might report a dead animal, a streetlight outage or a pothole. Often, it works.

Dennehy said Public Works prioritizes matters such as potholes that pose a danger to the public.

“Potholes would trump most of the public safety stuff we do,” he said.

The Citizens Connect website, though, shows a paper trail of constituent frustrations.

For example, a series of potholes at the entrance to the Massachusetts Turnpike at Newbury Street remained despite multiple complaints and city responses suggesting it had fixed the hazards.

“Now I know why the potholes have never been repaired,” one person [wrote](#) June 8. “You just close the case without doing anything.” This was apparently the person’s fourth complaint to the city. Visits to the Newbury Street site June 9 confirmed nothing had been fixed.

Some, but not all, of the Newbury Street potholes appeared to be fixed June 11.

Are you a writer?

Learn investigative reporting at Boston University with NECIR's student summer journalism program



In an [email](#), Oggeri, spokeswoman for the mayor, said the “case involves a multi-jurisdictional intersection,” and the “City completed work on its portion.”

Frustration with the system also was palpable in a May 18 [plea](#) about a manhole cover that had sunk at least a foot or Petrel Street, a residential, dead-end road “where many children play.”

“We have called an [sic] reported it many times and were promised months ago that it would be fixed in 2 weeks but it still hasn't been fixed.”

Dennehy said there was confusion about which unit would be repairing the pothole, and it “fell through the cracks.” The city reopened the case.

Public works crews maintain city property, which includes repairing potholes, between 7 a.m. and 3:30 p.m., Dennehy said. Sometimes, they use smartphones to report cases as closed and upload photographs. He said supervisors go in person to check each pothole to ensure crews filled them properly. But when shown a [photograph](#) NECIR took of a pothole on Tremont Street in Mission Hill that crews [reported repairing](#) but didn't, Dennehy said “stuff like this should be brought to my attention.”



Left photo: City crews reported filling this pothole on Tremont June 19. Right photo: NECIR took this photo of the same pothole July 8. (Left photo: City of Boston / Right photo: Brooke Williams, NECIR)

While the city's website states that potholes are fixed within two days of being reported, Dennehy, in the first of two interviews, said they do even better.

"We've actually reduced it down to a day," he said June 4. "We don't necessarily want to keep revisiting the same pothole because we didn't do it right, but we're pretty confident that we can get to it within one business day."

But an examination of the city's pothole database shows some take months to fix.

Of the cases marked "resolved" in the city's closed pothole data as of July 15, about 60 percent were reportedly fixed either on the same day or the next. The remaining 40 percent were reportedly closed in an average of about 12 days. In one [case](#) from the pothole data, an open manhole cover reported in May 2014 near the Old Bear Dens in Franklin Park wasn't fixed until March 26 of this year – 326 days – according to city records.

On the Eastbound side of Commonwealth Avenue, next to the Babcock Street Green Line platform June 1, was a [pothole so large](#) that cars were swerving across lanes to avoid it. City crews marked it as "Case resolved. done" on June 11. Despite a constituent referring to multiple [complaints](#) before and after June 11, it wasn't fixed until June 25.

Rebecca Bueno, a 17-year-old Brookline resident, remembers first seeing the pothole after snow plows came through. "If they say they fixed it, they should fix it," she said. "I want to be able to trust my city."