

ROAD PAVING PRIMER: MAKE SURE THE JOB GETS



By REBECCA KUSHNER

Since road maintenance and construction are likely to take a substantial bite out of your municipal budget, take the time to educate yourself on how to ensure high quality work from paving contractors. Every state has a local road center that provides classes and technical assistance, and some also have lists of approved contractors and materials. State transportation staffs are also good resources to check on materials, vendors, and contractors. Or you can hire an engineering firm to discuss your road paving plans.

As Stephen Jermone, circuit rider for Vermont Local Roads says, "There are three steps to maintaining a good road: drainage, drainage, drainage." A properly built road can be maintained for years, while a poorly built road will keep crumbling despite repeated overlays of asphalt. A solid base, plus pavement preservation, will end up saving you money in the long run.

That's why hiring a good contractor is important. First, have a written RFP or contract that specifies the types of mixes to be used, the depth of hotmix (a mixture of asphalt, cement and stone, gravel or sand) to be laid, as well as a timeline or

completion date and penalty for non-completion. According to Peter Coughlan, director of the Maine Local Roads Center, in all too many places, paving of town roads is done with no written contract, just a shake of the hand or an oral agreement between the town and contractor.

The second most important step is supervising the contractors, to make sure they don't cut corners. They may try to pave in wet weather or when the temperature is less than 50 degrees, times when road work shouldn't be done. If a load of hotmix asphalt is rejected by the state for being too cool, contractors may try to use the material on a town job instead – causing the mix to be even cooler by the time it arrives at the municipal job. Contractors may also skimp on the layers, for example, putting down one-half inch instead of three-quarters inch of hotmix.

Even if you're not a construction expert, you can still provide adequate supervision. Here are a few guidelines, particularly useful if you don't have enough staff to supervise the contractor full time: Carry a pocket thermometer or infrared heat sensing gun to test the temperature of the hotmix. Also carry a folding ruler or level to check the grading, which should

be one-quarter inch per foot. Bring a ruler to check whether the asphalt layer is the appropriate 1.5-to-2 inch depth – though Kenneth Barkyoub, Jericho, Vt., road crew foreman, uses a 5-inch nail instead.

Testing the work is useful. One trick is to take a bucketful of hotmix every day and store it, listing the date, time, and temperature. You'll only need to test the mixture if there's a problem, but taking samples shows the contractor that you're overseeing the work. For some tests, such as density, you may want to hire an independent laboratory.

Finally, don't forget to take photographs of the contractor at work or when the job is finished. If the road settles or cracks during the winter, the photos will be good evidence.

More information is available on the web sites of each state's transportation department. Maine's Local Roads Center has very useful information, including a paving checklist and sample specification document. See <http://www.state.me.us/mdot/mlrc/mlrc-home.php>. To find your Local Technical Assistance Center, go to <http://www.ltapt2.org/centers/list.htm>.

When looking for a contractor, first check the web site of your state's transportation department; New Hampshire and Connecticut have lists of approved contractors, many of whom work in more than one state, while other states list approved vendors and materials.

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