



Avoid Alligators in the Asphalt

By Stephanie Yeager

The first impression of the HOA is important to all community homeowners, but it is especially telling for prospective buyers in the community. A well-maintained, manicured HOA communicates a lot about the board, and the people and homeowners living in the HOA. It can say the community is well-run or just sliding by, and it can give pause to some about the funding of reserves and the competence of management. Or it can send a message of community and homeowner pride which likely will translate into value to the buyer and a better price to the seller.

One of the most obvious and largest investments in an HOA are its paved common areas, namely streets and parking lots. If these are clean and well-maintained, a buyer will appreciate the community and its pride in managing and maintaining a sense of connectedness and neighborliness. Streets and parking areas bring the community together, but unfortunately, paved surfaces are too often perceived as a utilitarian investment and a necessary and costly evil. Nothing is farther from the truth. Paving, maintained and done right, is the carpeting for a community. It adds value and improves the aesthetics of the grounds.

Most boards are not familiar with paving and the steps necessary to make sure a job is correctly completed.

Step 1: Project design and engineering. The pavement engineer must consider the existing soil conditions and end use of the pavement, i.e., residential driveway versus shipping facility. This is a major step in properly preparing the subgrade upon which new asphalt is to be laid. The asphalt contractor must make sure that the base is properly compacted and properly sloped to avoid premature failure or issues related to drainage during the life of the pavement.

Step 2: Asphalt installation and damage prevention. Project managers recommend the best product for the job given the location and use of the asphalt, and of course budget considerations. Proper maintenance suggests that an initial seal coat should be applied within the first to third year of any newly placed asphalt.

Step 3: Ongoing maintenance. Treating small fissures and problems as they appear will help slow further damage and prevent bigger issues. Seal coat and crack fills are recommended every three to five years subsequent to the initial paving. Creating a comprehensive pavement maintenance plan for this important asset is highly recommended. It is also suggested that a professional consultant with asphalt experience be used to ensure that the pavement maintenance plan is appropriate to the community and optimizes the life of the asphalt surface and community investment.

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Some useful terms and issues to know when speaking to contractors:

- Pavement oxidation causes the pavement to become brittle over time due to the deterioration of the binder, making the pavement more prone to cracking under pressure. As the asphalt becomes oxidized it will start to lose its black color, taking on a grayish tone.
- Raveling occurs when there is a constant runoff of water onto the surface due to weather conditions or issues such as bird baths, causing the surface to become loose.
- Cracking is caused by constant changes in temperature that cause the asphalt to expand and contract, as well as oxidation and water erosion, creating cracks over time that can form in different ways and corrupt the underlayment of the pavement.
- “Alligator cracking” is one of the most common and serious issues. It gets its name from its unique shape resembling reptilian scales, like an alligator’s. The problem with this kind of asphalt tear is that it can represent underlying problems either not addressed from the beginning or that it occurred over time due to pressure and poor drainage. When laying new asphalt, an experienced contractor will take into consideration the use and pressure on the asphalt, then make sure the base is properly prepared and compacted. Further, extreme weather conditions also have an impact on the pavement. Cracks created over time lead to water infiltration, slowly unsettling and eroding the base. This situation causes major problems like alligator cracking. “Alligating” without proper maintenance will spread from the surface to deeper layers of the asphalt causing small pieces to break loose, eventually creating a pothole.

Once the integrity of the asphalt has been compromised and the alligator cracks or any other major problems have set in, a contractor must:

1. Evaluate the problem during a job-site visit and determine whether it is superficial or if the issue goes all the way to the sub-base.
2. Develop a scope of work and plan of action to remove all damaged areas.
3. Fix any problems with a properly installed sub-base
4. Replace the asphalt.

It is important to remember that all steps are equally important to ensure the best results and to extend the life of the community investment.



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