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FEATURED

Hillsdale board OKs chip sealing in contentious meeting

Tiffany Greenwaldt-Simon

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1 of 3



Hillsdale Town Supervisor Dennis Michael Dvorchak speaking during the town board meeting Tuesday.

Tiffany Greenwaldt-Simon



HILLSDALE — The plan to chip seal two gravel roads in the municipality was approved at Tuesday's often contentious town board meeting.

Although the board approved the measure, it left the door open for residents opposed to chip sealing the roads to pay themselves for keeping the roads in their current state, which is dirt and gravel.

The planned chip sealing of Texas Hill Road and Appletree Lane was approved by a 4-1 board vote, with Hillsdale Town Board Member Jamie Carano Nordenstrom voting against the measure.

The two roads have gravel surfaces and the town Highway Department, with the board's approval, will chip seal the roads. The chip sealing, as well as other roadwork included in the highway department's plan, including the trimming of trees and making repairs to bridges and culverts, is expected to begin in August.

Chip sealing is the placement of an adherent on the surface of unpaved roads and reapplying pieces of gravel to the adherent. As the road is driven on, gravel is pushed into the surface to create a layer of protection. The chip sealing of Texas Hills Road and Appletree Lane will not begin until the installation of drainage and the placement of fabric and gravel for the chip sealing is completed.

"At the end of the day, the town board voted 4-1 for public safety, hazard mitigation and fiscal responsibility for all taxpayers," Town Supervisor Dennis Michael Dvorchak said Wednesday. "That is our responsibility, as elected officials, to consider all the taxpayers."

The board also voted to create a Gravel Gifting Committee, made up of Dvorchak, Highway Superintendent Richard Briggs and Town Clerk Robina Ward, to begin looking into ways for the town to accept a monetary gift from residents, which would fund the upkeep by the town highway department of the existing dirt and gravel Texas Hill Road and Appletree Lane.

"We founded a committee, so if the residents want to gift the town, we can figure out how to actually do that," he said.

The residents could make a cash gift to the town, that would be conditional to only be used toward the purchasing of gravel for the upkeep of the roads, Dvorchak said.

"This money would go back to the Highway Department and relieve the tax burden on those who don't live on (the two) dirt roads," he said.

According to documents posted on the town's website, estimates for gravel from A. Colarusso and Son's for the 2.1 miles of Texas Hill Road would cost the town \$144,970 for the length of the road. For Appletree Lane, the cost would be \$36,120 for the 0.48 miles of the road.

The cost to continue upkeep for the roads increase by roughly \$1,000 per year, based on a 3% inflation rate, and the 25-year cost for Texas Hill Road was estimated by the Highway Department to be \$5.2 million, and \$1.3 million for Appletree Lane.



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The board's plan to chip seal the two roads approved Tuesday night, followed a special public hearing where dozens of town residents came out to voice their support and opposition to the road work.

Brandon Lentine, who is also a member of Hillsdale's Planning Board, urged the town board to approve the plans to chip seal the roads for the safety of the public.

"I understand wanting to preserve the bucolic nature of the town," he said. "I understand that severely because that's why I joined the planning board and that's why I'm on all these other volunteer organizations. I love this place. It took me forever to find it and I want to keep it as close to what we have as I can."

Lentine said the visual difference between a loose gravel road and a chip sealed gravel road were "indistinguishable" to individuals who are not road experts.

"I'm 30 years in the construction industry," he said. "I am an expert. I can hardly tell. Being in the construction industry for so long, with over 100 hours of safety training, that a gravel road is far more dangerous than a chip seal road and we are creating a situation of liability now, where we have federal funds that are available that we're risking losing."

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According to the agreement between the town and the Hillsdale Highway superintendent, the chip sealing of Appletree Lane and Texas Hills Road will be paid for using a \$413,243 Consolidated Local Street and Highway Improvement Program grant, from the state Department of Transportation.

Resident Jim Chambers, who owns a farm near Appletree Lane, said the chip sealing will not make the road safer.

"When the gentleman started the meeting off saying it would absolutely make the road safer, well, in general, it might, but in specific for Appletree [Lane], it will not," he said. "I'm not recommending don't use federal money, but I am recommending don't use federal money just because it's federal money, but that's a whole other topic for another time."

Following the closure of the public hearing, when the town board's regular meeting began, the board voted 4-1 to declare the chip sealing of the two roads to have a negative impact on the environment. Carano Nordenstrom voted against the declaration.

During the meeting, Carano Nordenstrom attempted to counter motion Dvorchak's motion to approve the agreement with the highway superintendent on the roadwork, due to the motion not being put on the town board's agenda prior to the meeting and Briggs not sharing the documentation regarding the project in the public record.

"We wanted to see the documentation that he submitted," she said. "We wanted to hear from Richard [Briggs] about the projects and the data that you submitted to our agenda, that were also shared, apparently, on social media."

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Carano Nordenstrom added the costs provided by Briggs regarding the maintenance of the gravel roads versus the chip sealed roads were not able to be proven.

"So far, we do not know the cost associated with the preparation, execution, operation and maintenance of dirt roads and paved chip sealed roads," she said.

Carano Nordenstrom was cut off by Dvorchak, due to her meeting the 3-minute time limit on board comments regarding agenda items. Carano Nordenstrom told Dvorchak during the meeting that she and members of the public were being "censored," and members of the public shouted the town board worked for the public, and accused the board and Dvorchak of being hostile towards Carano Nordenstrom.

The exchange between Dvorchak, Carano Nordenstrom and members of the board, got heated at times, with Dvorchak and other board members occasionally raising their voice at each other.



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"We're accosted by the public, and I'm not going to stand for that," Dvorchak said. "I am not going to stand for that, absolutely not."

At one point, Briggs left the room after Carano Nordenstrom attempted to continue her initial statement, and urging the board to review the projects provided by Briggs regarding the cost of upkeep for Texas Hill Road and Appletree Lane.

Briggs eventually reentered the board meeting and said he had dedicated 20 years as the town's highway superintendent.

"Twenty years," Briggs said. "Twenty years of doing numbers. Twenty years of working with the Highway Department, goddammit," he said. "My numbers are turned over to the town board every month, and to have a town board member sitting here and accuse me of any kind of innuendo or anything like that. We've had the state comptroller's office here year after year after year doing audits. How dare you?"

Carano Nordenstrom said Wednesday she felt she did not receive adequate time to respond to the documentation that was provided in preparation for Tuesday's meeting, and added the board was not listening to its constituents.

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"It was very clear that they did not want to hear my view of the documentation submitted to the board," she said.

Carano Nordenstrom added she planned to continue bringing her concerns up to the board regarding the chip sealing of the roads in the future.

The plan to chip seal Apple Tree Lane and Texas Hill Road has been on the board's agenda since January. The town is also working on other infrastructure projects, such as improvements to its sewer system and the replacement of bridges, while also balancing potential impacts to funding for those projects, Dvorchak said.

"The councilperson was given ample opportunity to speak at length at multiple meetings," he said. "Not only do we have a massive sewer infrastructure problem, a bridge that needs to be repaired, we're also facing very uncertain times with the funding of grants."

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