
A Lot Can Ride On A Business Having a Good Parking Lot

By Paul J. Munsch

When they're in good condition no one notices, even though they're the front door to every business. But when they're in bad shape, everyone from employees to customers notice right away.

Cracked asphalt lots with potholes can be a major source of embarrassment and frustration for commercial and industrial property owners. Correcting, or best of all, preventing these situations can present a perplexing problem.

Using appropriate materials and following commercial specifications will prevent most problems before they begin. Too often, commercial lots are designed to withstand only light automobile office traffic. Most commercial lots, however, are traveled regularly by heavy trash and delivery trucks.

To withstand heavy traffic, commercial lots should be designed with an eight-inch layer of crushed limestone rock spread and compacted over graded soil. A three-inch layer of hot asphalt should then be spread and rolled over the compacted rock base.

Unfortunately, many lots are not properly installed and cracks and potholes appear.

Water and weight are the major culprits in pothole formation and work together to create a vicious circle. When water entering through surface cracks reaches the limestone base under the asphalt, it makes this base mushy, thus reducing its weight-bearing capacity. It also causes the base to settle, leaving a void between the base and the asphalt above it.

When a vehicle passes over the affected area, the asphalt collapses, forming a crack on either side of the original crack, thus allowing more water to enter. Eventually, freezing and thawing cycles combined with heavy traffic will break loose chunks of asphalt. Thus a pothole is born.

The best way to save an asphalt lot is to keep water from entering the base rock in the first place, through a maintenance program of crack filling, patching and seal coating.

Used as part of a preventive maintenance program before any serious damage occurs, seal coating can cost-effectively preserve both the appearance and the structure of a lot. Seal coating costs about 1/8th as much as an asphalt overlay that must be applied

to an already damaged parking lot. Generally, it makes economic and aesthetic sense to seal lots in apartment and industrial complexes and around office buildings. Because of the traffic volume around shopping centers, however, the sealer often wears off so quickly that it isn't practical to seal coat this type of lot.

If a lot has spider-web type cracking on more than 50 percent of its surface, a two-inch overlay over entire lots is the most cost-effective long-term solution. According to Jay Hensle, a researcher for the Asphalt Institute, "You can expect one year of crack free service from each inch of thickness on an asphalt overlay." It's important to note that while cracks may begin to reappear within two years after an overlay, it may be 10 to 15 years before the lot returns to its pre-overlay condition.

It is vital to overlay a cracked lot before it gets too bad. Cutting out and patching loose, broken asphalt and then overlaying it costs about three times as much per square yard as a simple overlay. In addition, the better the condition of the asphalt base that one is overlaying, the longer the overlay will last.

The most important step in developing an effective parking lot maintenance and repair program is to obtain a good parking lot renovation specification from a reputable asphalt paving contractor or engineer. Make sure the contractor has a good, long track record in parking lot renovation. A substantial list of repeat customers that the contractor is willing to share provides a good indicator of both experience and expertise.

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