



Dear Property Owner,

As part of its ongoing street maintenance program, the Department of Public Services regularly reviews the city's unimproved roadways and coordinates routine cape seal treatment. Your street has been identified for inclusion in a maintenance program tentatively scheduled to begin in the summer of 2018 (see attached map). This will include a special assessment based on property frontage.

For those unfamiliar with the process, this letter seeks to explain what cape seal is, how and why it is assessed to property owners, and, importantly, what alternative options exist.

**What is an 'unimproved' road?**

An unimproved road is a gravel road, with or without curbs, that has been maintained with chip or cape seal to provide a relatively smooth and dust-free driving surface.

**Why does Birmingham have so many unimproved streets?**

Prior to 1930, when the majority of Birmingham's neighborhoods were subdivided and opened for development, local streets were built as gravel roads with little if any provision for storm drainage. Streets were constructed with engineered pavement and drainage only when a majority of residents petitioned the City for such an improvement, the costs of which were then paid for through a special assessment on adjacent properties.

Beginning in the late 1940s, all remaining gravel roads were chip sealed, and thereafter all subsequent maintenance treatments have been assessed to property owners.

**What is cape seal treatment?**

Cape seal is a two-stage roadway surface treatment that provides unimproved roads with a moisture-resistant seal and a smoother driving surface. The process involves rolling stone chips into a layer of asphalt, followed several days later by an application of a slurry micro-surface. Cape seal is not a permanent solution; average life expectancy is less than 10 years.

**What is the maintenance cost?**

Since 1948, the City policy for assessing street maintenance work on unimproved streets is conducted in accordance with the following:

- Eighty-five percent of the front-foot costs for improvement are assessed on all property fronting on the improvement.
- Twenty-five percent of the side-foot costs for improvement are assessed on all residential property siding on the improvement.
- Eighty-five percent of the side-foot costs for improvement are assessed on improved business property siding on the improvement.
- Twenty-five percent of side-foot costs for improvement are assessed on vacant business property siding on the improvement.

The balance of the cost, 15% and 75%, front footage and side footage respectively, is paid by the City.

For the most current project, estimated per-foot costs for each property range from \$13.25 - \$21.83, and vary depending on street dimensions and the required preparation materials. These estimates include the

costs associated with a federal requirement to upgrade crosswalk ramps in the project areas to new ADA standards. Assessments for cape seal are billed as a one-time installment.

**What are the limitations of cape seal maintenance?**

Unimproved streets are not engineered roadways. Engineered, or *improved* roads are professionally designed by engineering firms to include proper drainage, grade, base construction, and other structural considerations. Because cape seal is only a surface treatment on *unimproved* roads, longevity cannot be guaranteed and the streets remain subject to weather- and traffic-related wear. Issues related to standing water, drainage, grade, and profile cannot be remedied through cape seal maintenance.

It is important to remember that cape seal is not a fix-all. Bumps and dips (with the exception of potholes) are likely to remain after the project. Further, in some cases, new issues can arise as a result of the treatment. Additionally, as long as a street remains 'unimproved', residents can expect periodic maintenance assessments.

**What if we want to install a better, more permanent pavement at this time?**

The Engineering Department has an established process that begins with a petition request presented by interested property owners. If sufficient interest is demonstrated, staff will host an informational meeting with residents to answer questions and address concerns. If support remains, the proposed project will be subject to formal public hearings to determine necessity and to establish the special assessment tax roll.

The cost of installing a permanent pavement is substantially more than cape seal maintenance. As a result, such projects are only initiated after a petition has been received indicating that over half of the owners on a street are in favor.

Because the process of obtaining support from neighbors for a permanent improvement can be time consuming, interested property owners should initiate the petition process *before* the formal public hearing of necessity. Streets preliminarily identified for inclusion in any cape seal maintenance project can be removed from consideration with sufficient notice and support.

**What are the cost differences between cape seal maintenance and a full improvement?**

Assessment estimates for the most recent cape seal maintenance project averaged \$15.26/ft. and can be expected every 7-10 years as part of the ongoing maintenance cycle. By comparison, the 2016 Villa Avenue paving project cost homeowners \$165.86 per linear foot, plus an additional \$8.44/ft<sup>2</sup> for driveway approach removal and replacement. The one-time assessments for improved roads are payable over ten years (subject to interest), and subsequent maintenance costs are covered by the City.

**What are the benefits of an improved road?**

In addition to providing a smoother, cleaner, more durable, and properly draining roadway, residents living on improved streets enjoy the benefit of street-side leaf pickup during the months of October and November. More importantly, all subsequent maintenance costs including patching, crack sealing, and, eventually, resurfacing or complete reconstruction, are the responsibility of the City.

**Who can I contact with additional questions?**

For specific questions regarding the upcoming cape seal project contact Aaron Filipiski, Public Services Manager, at 248.530.1701 or [afilipski@bhamgov.org](mailto:afilipski@bhamgov.org).

To obtain an improved street petition form, or for questions related to street improvement options, contact the Engineering Department at 248.530.1840. Additional resources and information are available at [www.bhamgov.org/streets](http://www.bhamgov.org/streets).