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Flick Gratele photo

Patty Breece of Kirkwood fills a pothole on South outer 40 near the Maryville Center Drive overpass.

Reporter goes on the road with MoDOT crew

Tasks involve potholes, road kill, more

By Jennifer Pope
Staff writer

Dodging speeding cars, picking up road kill and filling potholes wouldn't be most people's idea of a good time.

However, for Missouri Department of Transportation workers, it's a way of life.

Living life between the lanes, as it's referred to by MoDOT

crews, has its ups and downs, like most jobs.

Cathy Laxton has worked for MoDOT for five years.

Laxton, who has a background in construction, said she likes her job because it keeps her outdoors.

"I couldn't be cooped up inside a building, I'm an outdoors person," she said.

Although Laxton enjoys her

job, she said it is "dangerous and back-breaking."

Safety is very important, Laxton said.

"I've been pretty lucky," she said. "I've heard a lot of stories about people getting hit by cars."

There's only so much room to step out of the truck and onto the highway with cars flying by at 80 to 85 mph, Laxton said.

Even though Laxton isn't the only female crew member, she is one of but a few.



"You hardly find women in this job," she said.

It's a lot of hard work, heavy lifting and a dangerous environment -- lots of women don't want that, Laxton said.

Laxton is in charge of incident response at MoDOT's maintenance building at Ballas Road and Interstate 64 (Highway 40). Workers at the building cover state-maintained highways and roads in the West County area.

"Basically, whatever is in the

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Reporter goes on the road to patch potholes with MoDOT crew

(Continued)

road, I go get it," she said.

Laxton's day begins at 7:30 a.m., when she arrives at the building. Before heading out on the road, the truck must be fueled up and the oil should be checked.

Next, it is time to fill the back of the truck with EZ-Street, a mixture used to fill potholes.

The first call comes over the radio at 8 a.m.

The call was a Code 33, which sounds pretty harmless -- until you learn it means picking up a dead animal from the center lane of the highway. A raccoon that met more than its match was retrieved from eastbound I-64 west of Lindbergh Boulevard.

8:35 a.m.

It was time to start filling potholes on I-64. To fill a pothole, you first use a shovel to scoop a large amount of EZ-Street from the back of the truck. You then place the mixture in the pothole, overfilling it just enough so that when the mix is pressed down, it becomes even with the rest of the road.

8:45 a.m.

With the April 3 election less than three weeks away, candidates have placed campaign signs throughout the area. However, state law prohibits placing any signs within the state's right of way -- from the street to utility poles.

Our next job was to remove signs along Spodee Road.

9:02 a.m.

Next it was back to filling potholes. Several large potholes had opened on the entrance ramp to I-64 from McKnight Road. The new challenge was trying to dodge cars traveling onto the highway, while at the same time filling the hole. Although motorists clearly see you, wearing your very fashionable orange vest, they speed past you.

As we continue to fill holes, I am informed one of the first rules of MoDOT safety is to always face the traffic.

"I want you to see what hits you," Laxton said.

10:10 a.m.

We received a call about sheet metal on eastbound I-64 east of Highway 141. As we approached the area, we noticed the metal had been blown onto a grassy hill next to the shoulder. I was slightly relieved this call didn't require dancing with an 80-mph partner in the middle of the highway. We collected the metal and once again were on the road.

11:20 a.m.

A call came in about a concrete curb that had been hit by a vehicle and broken on westbound Manchester Road of Hwy. 141. Due to the amount -- and the size -- of the broken concrete, a crane was needed to lift the pieces into the back of the truck.

Traffic going onto Hwy. 141 had to be stopped while the crane lifted the concrete from the ground to the truck.

It was my job to stand on the onramp of 141, with my hands out -- bringing the traffic to a standstill. The feeling was overwhelming. The idea that a

small, 5-foot woman could stop that much horsepower with just two hands was unreal. This became the highlight of the day.

12:23 p.m.

We headed back to the maintenance building to unload the items we had collected on the truck. Once the items were unloaded, we buried the raccoon.

12:41 p.m.

Next it was back on the road to take down more signs and fill more potholes. By this time, my arms were becoming numb. It's not every day a reporter lifts so much. Between scooping the EZ-Street mix from the truck, pounding it into the ground and ripping signs out of the dirt, I was ready for an hour-long massage. But there was no time for that.

1:05 p.m.

We then were called to fill six large potholes on eastbound I-64 near Big Bend Boulevard.

We also picked up a muffler from the shoulder of the highway and chased down cardboard that was blowing across the road.

Our next challenge was to pick up a metal sawhorse in the right lane of southbound Interstate 270 between I-64 and Ladue Road.

The rest of the afternoon was spent filling potholes, which seemed to pop up everywhere.

Winding down

Spending a day in the shoes of a MoDOT worker was an eye-opening experience. As a motorist, you take for granted the work and risk faced daily by the crew.

Without these men and women, the highways and roads would be even more dangerous.

Laxton's day begins to wind down around 3:30 p.m. when she returns to the maintenance building to log her calls for the day and finish up some last-minute paperwork.