

This sewer crew is on top of problem, truck and all

Sinkhole - The location of a flawed line becomes clear when an intersection collapses in SE Portland

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AIMEE GREEN
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Even the 9-1-1 dispatcher had to ask Bruce O'Brien twice: Just what did you see?

O'Brien, who was standing about 10 feet from a city of Portland truck Tuesday afternoon, told the dispatcher that the street had given way and swallowed the truck in one fell swoop.

"It was like my eyes were playing tricks on me," O'Brien later recounted.

Within seconds, a 20-foot-deep sinkhole had formed, and the two city employees in the truck were scrambling up the sides of their 30-foot rig. The truck's impact broke a water pipe. A severed gas line was hissing and whipping around like a snake.

"It was scary," said O'Brien, a plumber who had been investigating low water pressure in an apartment building across the street from Buckman Elementary School, at Southeast 16th Avenue and Oak Street.

The two city workers, who were taken to the hospital with minor injuries, had been in the area to investigate a blocked sewer pipe.

Emergency repair crews speculate that a 2-foot-wide sewer pipe cracked, allowing the surrounding dirt to seep in and be swept away. Over time, a massive underground cavern took shape. The city truck rolled over a thin veneer of asphalt at precisely the wrong time.

"Even though they weren't that lucky," said Portland Fire spokeswoman Kim Kosmas, "they were lucky they weren't killed."

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Agency will try to find source of sinkhole

Crews dropped inside Southeast Portland's truck-swallowing sinkhole, replacing a section of damaged sewer pipe and installing liner for a new manhole last weekend.

The next step: figuring out why the massive hole opened under passing traffic Dec. 26.

A sewer truck crashed into the sinkhole at Southeast 16th Avenue and Oak Street, cracking the subterranean pipe. What still isn't clear is whether the sewer line was already leaking and caused the street to give way, said Dakota InyoSwan, Portland transportation spokeswoman.

"We don't know what the pipe looked like before the truck went in," she said.

It's up to the Bureau of Environmental Services to try to figure that out. The city also is looking at the possibility the sinkhole was caused by a leak from the Buckman pool.

As for the intersection opening to traffic again, InyoSwan said she couldn't guess on a date. Is it still weeks away? "Yes,

it's probably still weeks away," she said.

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— Joseph Rose