

# Roadside dirt contains precious metal left by cars

## ND researchers continue to examine whether fine platinum deposits are harmful.

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SOUTH BEND -- You may have heard of streets paved with gold. How about platinum?

University of Notre Dame student researchers Brian Bucher and Susan Dahlheimer are finding it all over town this summer.

Notre Dame researchers first discovered the precious metal on the sides of roads around St. Joseph County in 1999, and the study continues with students such as Bucher and Dahlheimer.

Early Thursday afternoon, the two students were hard at work at McKinley Avenue and Main Street in Mishawaka, hunched over and scraping dirt into zippered bags. They hardly noticed the curious looks they were getting from drivers.

Notre Dame professor and geologist Clive Neal is part of a team of researchers at the university to begin the inquiry.

He explained that Mother Nature did not deposit the metal into our soil -- cars did. As people drive on bumpy roads, platinum falls off the catalytic converters.

Catalytic converters use platinum -- as well as palladium and rhodium -- to convert carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds and nitrogen oxides into less harmful emissions.

"We're going to be scraping the top layer of the roadside dirt into the plastic bag. We're going to be labeling it, then we're going to be taking it back to the lab for processing," Neal said.

He said platinum levels they found near Notre Dame were about the same as the levels in a working platinum mine.

Since the study began, university researchers have been conducting experiments to determine whether the fine platinum deposits are harmful to people.



**University of Notre Dame senior Brian Bucher scrapes up roadside dirt looking for platinum Friday afternoon along Indiana 933 near the town of Roseland. Standing next to Bucher is his instructor, Notre Dame geology professor Clive Neal.**

Tribune Photo/KATE ZAVALA

They also are trying to develop a way to turn the particles they pull off the street into a product they can sell. Platinum is often used in jewelry.

"You have road sweepers come along, they sweep it, they go dump it ... could be money. We don't know," Neal said.

If Neal and his team are successful, their experiment could be quite lucrative. Lately, platinum has been selling for close to \$800 an ounce.

**Information from Tribune archives is contained in this report.**

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