

Construction Bulletin

South Dakota Roads: 'You get what you pay for,' by Dennis Slater, president and secretary, Association of Equipment Manufacturers

by Ivy Chang -- Construction Bulletin, 5/18/2009

The following article on the condition of South Dakota roads and investment in roads and bridges appeared in the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

For the economic health and quality of life of the state, South Dakotans should heed the recent report on ground transportation offered by The Road Information Program.

The report, "Future Mobility in South Dakota," (www.tripnet.org), shows that in the Mount Rushmore State about one-third of the major roads and highways are deficient.

TRIP estimates that South Dakota motorists each pay \$319 annually for wear on their cars resulting from substandard roads, and the state has averaged 168 traffic deaths annually in recent years. Costs like this are an economic hardship and safety concern in a state where the ability to drive is so critical to families and to business prosperity.

The state's bridges fared no better. Some 21 percent were structurally deficient in 2008 - fifth worst in the nation. Structurally deficient means significant deterioration of the bridge deck, supports or other major components. Such bridges are so deteriorated they are "often posted for lower weight or closed to traffic, restricting or redirecting large vehicles, including commercial trucks and emergency services vehicles." At some point, such bridges are unsafe at any speed.

Global competition

In the area of economic growth, global competitiveness is critical to South Dakota business, especially agribusiness, and that means well-maintained roads and bridges. Others certainly recognize the importance of transportation investment for economic

advantage. For instance, recent figures show that China has been investing 9 percent of its gross domestic product in infrastructure versus our 0.93 percent of GDP investment.

The good news and the bad news are the same. You get what you pay for. No one likes to contemplate an increase in the gas tax or any other fee, which is bound to be politically unpopular in South Dakota, as it is everywhere. Yet when asked if they would pay increased taxes to get better roads, people often respond "yes."

And that's where the TRIP report comes in. This data should help state residents see the huge benefits to transportation improvements.

All funding options

Although the recently signed economic stimulus package will provide some relief, that is not the same as really fixing the problems. Every funding option must be on the table: toll roads, user fees, public private partnerships, bonds, sales, property taxes, income taxes.

South Dakota has been living on borrowed time when it comes to its roads and bridges. No politician wants to mount the podium and announce new taxes. But do they want to be asked publicly, for example, if a disastrous bridge failure occurs, why they didn't do something about the disintegrating infrastructure?

Road quality is a topic in which the Association of Equipment Manufacturers has a long-standing interest. AEM was founded in the 1890s by farmers who needed better quality roads and bridges to ensure they could deliver their goods to market. It's true that road and bridge repair and building projects create needed jobs, but looking at the broader

scope, good transportation quality is all about economic survival, safety and our high standard of living.

What's Good For South Dakota. . .

Yes, South Dakota can do better to repair its infrastructure and to create more high-tech bridges. The top three infrastructure concerns in the state are roads, wastewater and drinking water.

Slater isn't pointing to South Dakota as the lone culprit that isn't meeting residents' needs in infrastructure. All 50 states have massive needs as organizations such as AGC of America, NUCA, Associated Builders & Contractors, American Society of Civil Engineers and many others have emphasized. The top three needs for each state are usually roads, bridges and water.

Americans need to look at what can be done to stop the massive repairs needed across the country. Perhaps mass transportation is one answer and a partial solution to building and repairing more roads. The energy demands across the country are mind-boggling and cannot be met for every state.

Any advanced society demands that government must scrutinize and meet transportation and road needs to continue its goals in commerce, education, energy, and the range of private and public services.

In a state with fewer than 1 million people, South Dakota has lagged in funding for infrastructure. So have the other 49 states.