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President of AEM Comments on the Need for Adequate Transportation Funding

by Dennis Slater, president of the Association of Equipment Manufacturers

Mark Twain is credited with saying, "Everybody complains about the weather but nobody does anything about it." The same could be said about our deteriorating roads and bridges, except that a few organizations, such as The Road Information Program (TRIP), are actually trying to clearly define the problems and offer solutions.

This week TRIP, a national nonprofit group, joined with key West Virginians in Charleston to communicate how poorly maintained surface transportation affects state residents. The report, "Future Mobility in [West Virginia: Meeting the State's Need for Safe and Efficient Mobility](#)," makes it clear roads and bridges in the Mountain State badly need attention.

If this sounds like just another funding pitch, think about what each West Virginia motorist pays each year for poor roads: \$280. That's \$280 for accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional repair costs, increased fuel consumption and tire wear. Statewide, for all motorists, that's \$371 million annually. Wouldn't that [money](#) be better spent upgrading roads and bridges, to save motorists more money in the longer run?

Along with improved driving conditions, building and repairing roads and bridges spreads the spending around. One government estimate says that nearly a \$1 billion invested in infrastructure creates nearly 35,000 jobs. With state unemployment at 8.5 percent in May, there is no time like the present to start rebuilding.

Critics say spending on infrastructure takes too long to get into the system, but earlier this year it was estimated that more than 3,000 highway projects across the country could begin construction within 60 to 90 days. That quick turnaround not only means jobs but also increased safety, accompanied by vehicle and traffic efficiency. West Virginia suffered 2.10 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of [travel](#) in 2007, which was the third highest rate in the nation - and 54 percent higher than the national average of 1.36. Improved safety, built into improved roads and bridges, would certainly change these numbers for the better.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act approved earlier this year provided \$211 million in stimulus funding for highway and bridge improvements and \$19 million for public transit improvements in West Virginia, but the state has a projected \$5 billion deficit in surface [transportation](#) funding in the next 10 years. As Joe Deneault, chairman of West Virginians for Better Transportation, pointed out, the 2009 stimulus package "will not make as big of an impact as we had hoped."

Adding to the problem for West Virginians and other Americans is that economic competition isn't just in the next county or in neighboring states, but everywhere in the world. The more than 800 companies my association represents know this as well as anyone - they need to locate manufacturing plants where they have access to quality transportation. Who is going to provide the necessary facilities in the next several years? China, which is [investing](#) 9 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) in infrastructure, or the US, which is investing 0.93 percent of GDP? You might say the Chinese are just catching up, but the reality is that we are not even maintaining what we built decades ago.

I urge West Virginians to join the movement to demand adequate [infrastructure](#) funding. We must tell Congress that infrastructure should have been a bigger priority in the stimulus package, and it needs to be a bigger priority now, especially with federal transportation legislation expiring in September. All funding options need to be on the table, and we must act now, before we all get further behind.