

End of the road: No funding solution in sight for infrastructure woes

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\$1,293: That's how much the average Hattiesburg-area driver loses each year by driving on deficient roads and bridges in Forrest and Lamar counties. The estimate from the national transportation research group TRIP is based on additional vehicle operating costs, congestion-related delays and traffic crashes suffered by drivers who are forced to travel on poorly maintained state, county and municipal roads and bridges.

"If we continue down the path we're on, it's going to get worse before it gets better," said David Hogan, president of the Forrest County Board of Supervisors. "Our revenue has not increased as quickly as the rising cost of road paving and bridge maintenance.

"I have confidence in our state and federal leaders that we are going to work together to address this most important obligation that we have as elected officials to provide safe roads and bridges for the taxpayers of Mississippi."

As chairman of the board of directors for the Mississippi Association of Supervisors, Hogan was behind an effort last winter to publicize the drastic need for more funding for road and bridge repair and maintenance in the state. The association, along with the Mississippi Association of County Engineers, held a series of meetings statewide to emphasize the infrastructure challenges counties are facing.

According to the engineers' association, 76 percent of the 52,000 miles of county roads in the state need pavement maintenance, with 46 percent in poor or very poor condition. Thirty percent of county bridges cannot carry legal loads. TRIP says 28 percent of roads in the Hattiesburg urban area are in poor condition.

Hogan had hoped the special legislative session Gov. Phil Bryant scheduled to start Monday would bring some relief. But, although lawmakers are set to approve a budget for the Mississippi Department of Transportation, the agenda doesn't include any other new stream of infrastructure funding.

Bryant has said he was open to lawmakers dealing with a lottery or other potential revenue sources for infrastructure in the special session, but only if House and Senate leaders had tacit agreement beforehand. Such agreement has never materialized.

Tom King, Southern District Transportation Commissioner, said the condition of Mississippi's roads and bridges has reached a crisis level.

"Hopefully, they'll appropriate a funding mechanism for bridges and highways," King said. "I think they will certainly vote a regular appropriations budget (for MDOT), but I don't know if they'll come up with another funding mechanism."

King said the department hasn't had an increase since 1987.

"We had a great program in 1987, but it was all focused on building new roads, new highways," he said. "Now we're just focused on repairing those roads we built in '87."

Sen. John Polk, R-Hattiesburg, said he is not inclined to vote for additional monies for MDOT.

"I will be voting for some kind of bill to fund them for their (annual) operations," he said. "But increasing taxes to fund highway infrastructure and bridge infrastructure — that's where I get more hesitant." Polk said MDOT lacks transparency and he has the most problem with the professional managers and

non-elected officials rather than the elected commissioners.

"I think there's a huge amount of waste in the way that agency operates," he said. "I don't see how I can vote to give them an expanded budget when they are so wasteful with the money they have." Increasing the state's gas tax to pay for road and bridge improvements was raised by the association of county engineers during the series of meetings last winter. Other funding measures that have been put forth include a state lottery, a bond measure and allocating taxes collected on internet sales in the state.

"To get our roads and bridges back to good condition, we need \$375 million at the state, county and city level," said Scott Waller, interim president and CEO of the Mississippi Economic Council. "We are definitely not bringing in enough dollars to address the transportation needs we have today, much less the needs of the future."

The funding could be used over a 10-year period to replace 183 state bridges that are no longer able to carry the weight of traffic, replace all timber bridges as well as another 424 deficient bridges and ramp up MDOT's pavement maintenance.

The economic council suggested \$300 million should go to state-owned bridge and road upkeep and \$37.5 million each should go to counties and cities. Local officials have said they need much more than that.

Waller said no matter how the money is divvied up, it is much needed. When companies locate to this state, the No. 1 factor is workforce, but No. 2 is transportation.

"It does have a big impact on the economy, not just in the ability to attract companies, but we know you'd see about 4,000 jobs created in the construction industry if you went to road and bridge investment," he said. "Over time, as you put the money into there and the infrastructure was improved, you'd see 7,000 jobs in all sectors."

How to come up with \$375 million is the big question. Rep. Percy Watson, D-Hattiesburg, said legislative leaders have been meeting before the special session to debate that question.

"I don't think you'll find anyone who questions the need, but how do we address it?" he said. "I have opinions, but I'm not really in a position to discuss them at this point."

"You certainly can finance it with an increase in the gas tax, an increase on internet sales, increase in sales tax, increase in income tax, removing exemptions from income tax.

"It's just a very difficult issue to deal with. It's difficult to pass it through both chambers of the Legislature." But not dealing with the issue can have fatal consequences, as Lamar County found out in October 1992. A bridge collapsed on Old Highway 24 over Black Creek, killing two people and injuring several others.

"We don't want anything like that to happen again," county engineer Don Walker said. "The county implemented a bond program and in a matter of 2½ years we were able to replace 56 bridges.

"That's why Lamar County is in better shape than most counties. Within my last couple terms as county engineer, with the bond issue, we were able to replace (more than) 70 bridges."

The \$4.5 million bond issue was enacted by county supervisors with public support shortly after the bridge collapsed.

"It was very cost-effective," Walker said. "When you're able to replace 76 bridges for \$4.5 million — you just can't do that with state and federal funds. They trickle in very slowly."

Lamar County has only four bridges currently undergoing work or needing planned work.

"Really and truly, we're in pretty good shape," Lamar County Supervisor Joe Bounds said. "Roads (and bridges) have been a priority for us."

"We do need state aid funding to maintain what we've got."

Lamar County also has some state roads that need about a total of \$4.8 million in minor rehabilitation — Mississippi 42 near Sumrall and U.S. 98 near Mississippi 589.

Forrest County has more work to do. It has three bridges that need urgent maintenance and nearly 40 bridges that need routine maintenance. Forrest County is currently spending \$680,000 in state money to build a new bridge on Broad Street in downtown Hattiesburg.

"One of our bridges on Broad Street was one of 100 bridges around the state that had to be closed down," Hogan said. "Two of our bridges need major repairs."

"Some of them are wood piling bridges. We do very routine maintenance, but they need to be upgraded to concrete pilings. But with limited funding and resources, it's hard for local governments to bear the brunt of a major bridge repair cost."

Forrest County also has some state roads that need a total of about \$4.9 million in minor rehabilitation — Mississippi 42 near Rawls Springs and U.S. 98 off U.S. 49 near Hattiesburg.

Steve Gray, director of government affairs for the Mississippi Association of Supervisors, said the infrastructure situation in one county is a problem for all counties.

"From a public safety standpoint, we're all affected by it," he said. "Even if we're in a wealthy county where (roads and bridges are) taken care of, at some point, you're going to have to travel outside your county and you'll be affected."

Gray said the economic and governmental groups in the state are primed for action.

"The legislative groups in the state are ready to roll. We're ready to do something," he said. "We just need action from a legislative standpoint."

"If it doesn't happen (this special session), hopefully it will happen next session. There have been efforts going on in other states, and they're getting it done. People are moving forward and we're waiting. It's a difficult task, but it needs to get done."

By the numbers

\$1,293: Cost per year to average Hattiesburg car owner because of driving on bad roads

\$640: Increase in costs to Mississippi drivers if roads not improved

28 percent: Major roads in Hattiesburg urban area that are in poor condition

46 percent: County roads in poor or very poor condition

20 percent: Mississippi bridges in need of repair

13 hours: Time lost by Hattiesburg drivers per year due to traffic congestion

\$375 million: Money needed each year in new revenue to address Mississippi transportation needs

0: Increase in funding for infrastructure in last 30 years

Source: TRIP and Mississippi Association of Supervisors