



Funding for Roads and Bridges: Why is it important to taxpayers?

JACKSON, MISS. - Today's underfunding of Mississippi's transportation system is leading to the crumbling of the state's roads and bridges. This is no longer only a road and bridge problem but an issue affecting economic development and community growth throughout the state.

"The current level of funding means the state-owned rural highway system will continue to be neglected," said Mississippi Department of Transportation (MDOT) Executive Director Melinda McGrath. "In order to save Mississippi's transportation system, action must be taken today. There has been no significant change in state revenue for roads and bridges since 1987. This has caused many Mississippi highways to crumble past the point of repair, and they now require complete rehabilitation."

The deterioration of the state's highway network is most noticeable along rural routes. Roads and bridges in these areas are passable, but the condition is poor. The longer these rural roads continue to be ignored, the worse the situation will become, and the more money it will cost the taxpayers of Mississippi to fix.

Unfunded projects are a public safety issue. Last year, 677 Mississippians were killed on the state's roadways. As road conditions continue to decline, the safety risk to the traveling public continues to rise.

There have been recent discussions by legislators to cut MDOT's budget by \$50 million and give that portion to the counties and municipalities.

"At the request of Legislative leadership, MDOT provided a list of transfers that fund non-highway programs at other state and local agencies totaling \$50 million," said Northern Transportation Commissioner Mike Tagert. "These non-highway programs are mandated, but unfunded, and must be paid out of MDOT's budget. If MDOT could use these funds on highways, an immediate increase of \$50 million would be spent on state-owned rural roads."

After federal dollars and their legislatively mandated local match funds, and project specific revenue bonds are removed from MDOT's budget, \$300 million remains for operational costs to meet state and federal regulations. Also included in these operational costs are funds to maintain highways in a state of good repair for the traveling public.

"This \$300 million is used for daily operational expenses," McGrath said. "This includes \$200 million the state spends on routine maintenance for patching potholes, repairing roadway slides, repairing bridges and clearing roadways after emergencies as first responders, just to name a few."

In the mid-1900s, county roads were given to the state creating a paved network of farm to market routes, many of which are still in use today. Because Mississippi is primarily an agricultural state, these rural corridors are vital to economic development. These roads continue to be neglected, because the majority of today's state transportation funding goes toward the preservation of major infrastructure routes – interstate and four-lane highways. These routes carry the majority of general statewide and commercial traffic.

"MDOT maintains 30,000 highway miles, and 11,000 miles need to be repaired or replaced," Tagert said. "And, approximately 900 of the 5,700 bridges MDOT maintains need to be reconstructed, because they have restrictions that hinder commercial traffic."

Many bridges in rural areas are more than 60 years old and were built using timber pilings. Over time, timber pilings rot due to weathering and age. This natural process weakens the bridge structure. As these pilings fail, the maximum weight allowed on the bridge is reduced, or the bridge is closed to traffic.

"MDOT is utilizing its funding to meet the state-owned transportation system's greatest needs; however, the condition of roads continues to deteriorate faster than the state has the funding to improve them," said Southern Transportation Commissioner Tom King. "During our most recent legislative information request, MDOT produced research information indicating an additional \$400 million annually for 10 to 15 years is needed to halt the deterioration and restore the state-owned highway system for Mississippi to remain economically competitive and reduce fatalities."

Unless additional funding is secured, numerous paving, bridge and capacity upgrade projects across Mississippi will not be constructed.

"If funded, these projects will connect major routes in rural areas while repairing deficient bridges," King said.

For example, there is a need to four-lane Highway 19 in Neshoba County from Meridian to Philadelphia, U.S. Highway 278/State Route 6 from Batesville to U.S. Highway 61 through Panola, Quitman and Coahoma counties, and a section of Highway 24 from East Fork to Interstate 55 in Pike and Amite counties. These projects connect multiple cities and will build capacity for industries along the corridor. Without additional funding, neither of these projects will move forward.

A bridge on State Route 26 in George County, a major agricultural corridor, needs to be replaced to accommodate the weight of commercial vehicles. Highway 35 in Smith County, an important economic connector that links Highway 49 to Interstate 20, has critical rutting issues from the Covington County Line to Raleigh and needs to be repaved.

There is a need to create multiple bypasses across the state. Constructing a U.S. Highway 82 bypass around Greenville in Washington County and a Highway 15 bypass around Ripley in Tippah County would add capacity to the existing roadways and remove commercial vehicle traffic from downtown areas and off city streets. Economic developers say businesses and industries have not located to these areas because of the lack of adequate infrastructure to carry the increase in commercial traffic.

Projects like these would improve safety for the public and significantly advance economic development for the state. These communities will not grow until the roads are expanded to attract commerce.

"These projects and more than 550 statewide will do more than just make people's drives safer and more convenient," said Central Transportation Commissioner Dick Hall. "Particularly in rural areas, these projects will connect communities and stimulate economic growth and development throughout the region."

In 1987, the Mississippi Legislature passed an unprecedented \$1.6 billion long-range highway bill, commonly known as the "1987 Highway Program." At the time, it was one of the most comprehensive in the country and called for the construction of over 1,000 miles of four-lane highways across the state. It also established a funding mechanism for construction in the form of an 18.4 cent per gallon fuel tax.

Unfortunately, the "1987 Highway Program" did not address funding needs to preserve Mississippi's highway system into the future or account for inflation in the construction of additional roadways. Over

the past 30 years, rising construction costs with no increases in funding has forced MDOT to shift to a maintenance only approach and focus on system preservation.

“Rising construction costs and aging infrastructure means MDOT will not be able to maintain the current condition of the system or build any new lanes or roadways,” Hall said. “Without an increased investment in transportation, the majority of funds will be utilized to repair existing infrastructure and address safety projects while delaying projects that would repair aging infrastructure in rural areas, add capacity to the transportation network and stimulate the state’s economy.”

For a list of all the unfunded highway projects in Mississippi, a map of the unfunded projects and a reference map of the state’s transportation districts, visit GoMDOT.com/betterfundingbetterroads.