



View from the Chair

Missouri Highways and Transportation Commission

Another unseen casualty: the loss of talent

September 30, 2015



Dear Reader,

Our failure to invest in transportation has many consequences. I have previously detailed our decaying roads and bridges. Most recently I have highlighted the detrimental effects on Missouri's construction industry and its workers and professionals. There is still another unseen consequence – one that very much worries the Commission. It concerns our own house: the men and women of MoDOT.

In an anti-government age, this may not be a popular topic. But the fact remains that our collective well-being requires committed and competent public servants. No where is this more true than in transportation. We need professionals to work with the public in planning – and with engineers in designing – and with contractors in building – and with law enforcement in assisting – and with emergency responders in saving. We need drivers willing to plow snow through the night and maintenance workers willing to work within a few feet of 70 mile-per-hour traffic to care for our roads.

We have heard the call to cut government fat, to run lean and mean, and to operate more like private business. That's why, over a five-year period, we reduced MoDOT's workforce by 1,200 – a 20 percent reduction from 6,300 when I joined the Commission – to 5,100 today. We closed 124 maintenance facilities and consolidated from ten districts to seven, shuttering three district offices. We sold off 752 pieces of heavy equipment (e.g. plow trucks, motor graders, loaders, tractors, etc.). In the process, we put \$600 million back on the roads; money that went directly to contractors to help preserve our system. The crisis we face today would be much worse and would have occurred much sooner if we had not taken these measures. No other department of transportation in the country has taken these kind of steps.

Is this praiseworthy? Yes. But you know what. It is something that we should be doing. It is

responsible stewardship. And, it is the right thing.

During our five-year downsizing and reorganization there was another little-publicized initiative within MoDOT. There was a concerted effort to evaluate the organization from top to bottom. This involved virtually every MoDOT employee except maintenance workers having to re-apply and compete for a position within the department. It was a herculean and difficult effort. Can you imagine the stress it would cause within your own organization if you suddenly announced that there was no job security and everyone must compete for a position? And, what if during that same time all wages were frozen? And, the organization was also reforming its pension plan and medical benefits? You get the picture. That is what MoDOT employees endured: uncertainty, stress and sometimes, disappointment.

Today, MoDOT is a better, stronger organization because of this sacrifice. It is well-poised to care for the seventh largest transportation system in the country – if only it had the resources to do it. Instead, MoDOT employees are being asked to preside over a system that is crumbling; they are being asked to make very difficult decisions regarding where limited monies are spent; they are having to say “No” to the needs of many Missourians. This makes for a difficult work place. An employee can endure many stresses of the job when there is the joy of building something together; getting better each day; achieving and surpassing goals. But that is not today’s reality. Employees watch as bridges close and roads get worse. It is a helpless feeling.

As a result, some of our best and brightest employees are leaving. They joined MoDOT with hope of making significant contributions to the public good: improving safety, creating economic opportunity and moving Missouri forward. Who would continue to work in a private company that was not moving forward and not providing opportunity? Bright, talented and ambitious people move on. No one wants to be caretaker for a system lacking adequate resources. MoDOT has been very fortunate to retain so many talented committed professionals, but how long this can continue in the current environment is of grave concern to the Commission.

We have treated MoDOT like a business. Now Missourians need to fund MoDOT like a business. No business can survive without adequate revenue and resources. We have a huge physical plant to care for and many needs to address but we cannot do it in 2015 on a 1990s revenue stream. The time is now; if we wait longer we may not have the talented and experienced team of today to address tomorrow’s challenges.

Let’s get after it,

Stephen R. Miller
Chairman

If you would like to communicate with the Commission, you can always reach us at MHTC@modot.mo.gov. If you would like to read previous issues of the “View,” you can find them on the MoDOT website: <http://www.modot.org/ViewFromTheChair/index.htm>

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