



# View from the Chair

Missouri Highways and Transportation Commission

## Legislative leaders speak in favor of transportation funding

October 27, 2015



Dear Reader,

The Commission gathered recently in Poplar Bluff – the hometown of Senator Doug Libla and House Speaker Todd Richardson. It was great to be with the people of southeast Missouri, on the campus of Three Rivers College. Speaker Richardson reminded all of us that our major industries in Missouri – agriculture, manufacturing, retail and tourism – all depend upon a robust transportation system. He noted that Missouri stands at the country's heart and at the confluence of a great network of rails, rivers and roads. This network is a precious resource that must be protected.

As our other speakers made clear, we are not investing in our transportation system as we should, as evidenced by the 641 critical-condition bridges in our state, including over 100 in Southeast Missouri. Four bridges across the state are currently closed and over 1,400 bridges have weight limits or lane restrictions. We must find a way to address the issue now.

Senator Libla noted how important recent improvements to Highways 60 and 67 have been to the communities throughout his district. To continue to maintain vital transportation infrastructure, we need long-term funding, he said, quick fixes won't work. He emphasized the importance of transportation investment to economic development – both retaining our current businesses and attracting new ones.

But the Senator emphasized that Missourians must move past merely acknowledging the problem and wringing their hands. They must work to find solutions, embrace them and work to get them enacted. He reminded us that in 1924, the voters spoke regarding their preferred method of funding road and bridge improvements – a motor fuel user tax. He recalled that transportation investment has always been a bipartisan issue. Of the four fuel-tax increases since 1924, two have been signed into law by a Democratic governor and two by a Republican governor. But unfortunately, there have been no adjustments in the last 20 years.

This lack of funding has real life impacts on real people. No part of the state is immune but Area Engineer David Wyman spotlighted several critical-condition bridges right in the backyard of our

hosts:

- Sinking Creek Bridge on Route 19 – the only north-south route in Shannon County – is 90 years old. It carries tourist traffic along the Ozark National Scenic Riverways and is a vital link for the logging industry. A temporary bridge was placed in May to keep this route open to all traffic. A long-term solution still must be found.
- Route Z in Stoddard County is peppered with five critical-condition bridges that on average are 59 years old. It is a critical connection to the Pioneer Seed plant, New Madrid Port and Interstate 55 and provides access to Martin Rice, the only rice mill in the Bootheel.
- Four critical-condition bridges dot Route 91, also in Stoddard County. All of them were built in 1933 and are now more than 82 years old. They carry 700-800 vehicles per day, provide agricultural access to the SEMO Port and Interstate 55 and are vital to local residents seeking emergency medical services.
- An 86-year-old bridge on Route 49 in Wayne County carries over 1,300 vehicles per day and is essential to a nearby granite quarry. Limitations on it impact the Clearwater School District and access to healthcare.
- The Chester Bridge on Route 51 in Perry County is a 73-year-old major river crossing carrying over 6,300 vehicles per day. Its closure would force an 88-mile detour impacting residents and businesses on both sides of the river. It needs to be replaced but the price tag is estimated at \$100 million.

All but a handful of counties in the state suffer from this same sad predicament. But there is more. After hearing that we do not have sufficient funding to even preserve the current system, we listened to the pleas from a local business leader to help his community realize economic opportunities. Scott Spencer, a local banker, reminded the Commission that in 2005 citizens in Poplar Bluff passed a one-half cent sales tax to fund one-third of the cost to four-lane Highway 67 between Poplar Bluff and St. Louis. They want to finish the job by completing the last 14 miles to the Arkansas line.

The visit to the hometown of two of Missouri's political leaders reminded us of the hard work that lies ahead: our generation must do what previous generations have done – step forward, find a solution and pass a long-term funding measure – for our sake and the sake of future generations.

The time is now.

Stephen R. Miller  
Chairman

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