



View from the Chair

Missouri Highways and Transportation Commission

Missourians deserve solutions, not excuses

November 12, 2015



Dear Reader,

As the Commission approached the task of recruiting a new director to lead our department of transportation, the national search firm warned us to be realistic with our expectations. Why would someone want to come to a state that ranked near the bottom in transportation funding, had spent the last five years eliminating 1,200 jobs, closing over 120 facilities and selling off nearly 750 pieces of heavy highway equipment? These cuts put \$600 million dollars back on the roads – but only delayed the inevitable decline of an underfunded transportation system: 641 critical-condition bridges;

the inability to preserve the system; the rationing of repairs and maintenance; the suspension of the cost-share program; the deferral of planning studies and an increase in fatalities. Most distressing, however, was the apparent lack of will to identify and implement a long-term reliable funding solution to arrest this serious decline. Recognition of the situation was not a problem, but taking action has proven to be.

How would we explain to candidates a state which in previous generations had the courage to build out the nation's 7th largest transportation system; to pull the state up and out of the mud; to construct an enviable farm-to-market network of roads; to give birth to the interstate highway system – but had now lost its way? How would we make sense of a state where the importance of transportation is recognized, yet years pass without a viable long-term funding solution? At a time when neighboring states are raising new revenues, attracting new jobs and generating economic opportunities, how would we explain a state where excuses substitute for action?

We assured the search team that Missouri was a better place than it appeared. Yes, the statistics were true. And, resignation of the House Speaker and political maneuvering last spring had prevented even a modest increase in one of the nation's lowest fuel taxes from even coming to a vote. But, great leaders seek out great challenges – and Missouri represents a challenge. The

department had been cut to the core, but still retained its core competencies with a dedicated and talented work force. Any new revenues which might be enacted were protected by the constitution from being diverted for other purposes. We did have good leaders committed to transportation, we just needed to continue to educate the naysayers. And, as the hub of the greatest economic engine in the world, Missouri was blessed with a logistic centrality which was the envy of the nation. In short, Missouri had great unrealized potential.

We were fortunate that talented leaders from around the country saw the Missouri the Commission envisioned and not the Missouri the search team described. Competition for the next MoDOT director was intense and we recruited a leader with a varied background in private business, not-for-profit endeavors and public service – both in the Office of the Secretary of the U.S. Senate and the New Hampshire Department of Transportation. Patrick McKenna is leaving his home state because he believes in us. But, how much do we believe in ourselves?

Ironically, on the eve of announcing Patrick's appointment there were some naysayers who were stating publicly that Missouri had no need for new funding. Those who are opposed to additional funding say just squeeze more efficiencies out of MoDOT. Make more cuts. Never mind that we would sacrifice core competencies. The funding of the 1990s should be good enough for 2015 and beyond. Never mind what other states were doing. Or money could simply be taken from other programs. Never mind they are already underfunded. These are simplistic, inadequate and short-term approaches that do not position us for the future. The responsibility rests with all of us to speak out clearly regarding the Missouri we want for ourselves – and our children. Will it be the picture the search team so feared we projected or the one that attracted Patrick McKenna.

Let's not fail to do our best – and do it starting now.

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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