



View from the Chair

Missouri Highways and Transportation Commission

Let's give thanks for our blessings – and pass them on

November 25, 2015



Dear Reader,

I had a chance last week to address the annual meeting of the Missouri Association of Counties, a gathering of Missouri mayors and the Columbia Chamber of Commerce. Anticipating this holiday week, I spoke about all we have to be grateful for – from a transportation perspective.

We have been blessed by our geography. While we lack great oceans and majestic mountains and our weather can be less than ideal at times – frigid winters and steamy summers – we are blessed to lie at the heart of America – the hub of the greatest economic engine in the world. We also enjoy one of the world's great river systems– the Missouri/Mississippi Valley – a rival to the Amazon in South America, the Rhine in Europe, the Nile in Africa and the Yangtze in Asia.

We have been further blessed by the commitment of our forbearers to develop these resources for the common good. Thomas Jefferson understood the significance of these natural gifts when he purchased the Louisiana Territory from the French and commissioned Lewis and Clark. He charged these adventurers to determine how these new lands might be used for commerce and contribute to the prosperity of the republic.

As the "Gateway to the West," Missouri from its birth has been grounded in transportation. Merchants and traders flocked to Missouri for new opportunities, steamboats plied our waters inspiring a young Mark Twain, frontier families loaded wagon trains in Westport, Missouri, the trail head for westward migration along the California, Santa Fe and Oregon trails, and railroads crisscrossed our land creating the second and third largest freight rail hubs in the country in St. Louis and Kansas City.

Approximately 120 years after the Louisiana Purchase, Missourians responded to the advances

and challenges of the day in 1920 and created a department of roads to build a system of farm-to-market roads. They didn't dream small; they envisioned a broad network of roads. In 1924 they voted to impose a tax on fuel to fund construction. Almost 30 years later – in 1952 – they decided that a professional highway department was better suited than individual counties to achieve the goal of having a paved road within one mile of every farm in Missouri and so almost 12,000 miles of what in other states are county roads, were added to the state system. Their big dream has produced big benefits for Missouri but it also means we have a big system to care for – larger than Nebraska, Iowa and Illinois combined.

Missouri also led the way in the development of the next generation of highway travel. In 1956, the interstate highway system was born – and it started right here in Missouri. In 2014 we celebrated our latest addition: the conversion of US Route 71 to Interstate 49. People and goods traverse our state from Canada to Mexico and from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

In a matter of a few decades, Missouri had built an enviable system of almost 34,000 miles of roads and 10,400 bridges. We did it by consistent investment at both a state and federal level. All of us now in a position of leadership inherited this great system – but now we seem to have lost our way. We have stopped investing as our parents and grandparents did. No new funding has been advanced in Missouri since 1992 and at the federal level since 1993. In that time the cost to resurface or reconstruct a mile of road has tripled and the average cost to replace a bridge has more than doubled. But we are stuck with the same revenue sources of a generation ago.

What would it mean to your family if you attempted to feed, clothe, shelter and educate them today on the same income you were making 20 years ago? How would you continue to run your business when your costs are three times more but the price you charge and revenue you receive is the same as 20 years ago? We understand these personal economics but not for the essential infrastructure on which all of this depends. We wouldn't think of inheriting a home from our parents and then failing to patch the roof, paint the exterior and upgrade the plumbing and electrical systems to keep it safe and in good working order. We wouldn't consider passing on to our children a house in disrepair. But that is exactly the course Missourians are currently charting for their highway/bridge system.

The greatest generation asked "what can I do to make the world a more peaceful, secure and better place than I found it?" As we give thanks this holiday season for the many blessings we have received perhaps it is a good time to consider for what we will be remembered.

May this Thanksgiving spur us to action in the coming year.

Happy Thanksgiving to all!

Stephen R. Miller
Chairman

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