

When I ask my neighbors in Eastern Jackson County what the number one problem facing the State of Missouri is they typically respond that it is the dilapidated condition of our roads and bridges. Adding to this frustration is the fact that politicians, pundits and the press repeatedly decry the condition of our transportation system but year after year goes by with no improvement. Let me briefly recap the history of how we came to find ourselves in this unenviable situation.

Though Missouri is not the nation's largest State either in terms of population or geography, we do have one of the nation's largest State-funded road systems. The main reason for this is that during the 1950's there was a campaign to "pull Missouri out of the mud" and to bring nearly every home within a couple miles of a paved road. This campaign resulted in around 10,000 miles of roads that were once maintained by individual counties being taken over by the State. This arrangement continues to this day requiring Missouri to spend millions of scarce transportation dollars on road projects that in other States would be borne by individual counties.

In addition to this generous adoption of thousands of miles of county roads, in 1992 the Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) and State officials promised an aggressive "15 Year Plan" to build hundreds of miles of four-lane highways across Missouri, designed to connect nearly every community of any significant size. It soon became apparent that funding wasn't matching promises and you know the rest of the story - confidence in MoDOT suffered, the voters rejected a tax hike for roads and we find ourselves with decaying highways and bridges and not enough money to fix them.

One of the worst examples of the embarrassing condition of our highways is Interstate 70 that many of us use on a near daily basis. Even the newest parts of I-70 are approaching 40 years of age and a casual drive down this congested thoroughfare shows that it carries far more traffic that it should. I-70 badly needs to be taken down to the dirt and rebuilt from one side of the state to the other. Simply overlaying the old concrete is an expensive bandaid that does not get Missourians a safe, smooth I-70.

I believe that a solution is within reach and that it must become a serious priority of the governor and the legislature. Possible solutions were discussed in a study of I-70 commissioned by MoDOT. This study sets forth possibilities ranging from widening the existing road to six lanes to building a brand new parallel toll route.

I am particularly intrigued by the concept of toll roads though the jury is still out as to whether they should be used to add extra lanes or a new parallel road. A recent survey conducted by my office of citizens in Eastern Jackson County shows that 64% of respondents support tolling. When I speak to groups, I commonly ask how many would support tolling I-70 to rebuild and expand it to six lanes. The response is overwhelmingly supportive of tolling every time. Tolling is appealing for a variety of reasons but two of the most compelling are that tolls are levied directly on those that use the highways most, including many travelers passing through our State. Missourians pay for I-70 when they travel through Kansas, but Kansans get a free ride through Missouri care of Missouri taxpayers. Perhaps the most appealing aspect of tolling is that it would enable us to finally be able to get off dead center and see some positive action being taken on I-70 with the funds tolling would bring in. Missourians have overwhelmingly

opposed tax increases for roads and yet overwhelmingly favor better roads. Tolling would ensure taxpayers that money spent actually went to the road they were traveling.

A tolling plan would require that Missouri's Constitution be changed to give MoDOT the authority to set up tolls. I intend to sponsor legislation to put this option to a vote of the people when the legislature reconvenes early next year. We have set back and discussed the problems long enough. If we are ever going to have an adequate transportation system we must take decisive action. Toll roads alone won't solve all our highway problems but it is a real start.

What do you think? Feel free to write me at matt_bartle@senate.state.mo.us.