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Overcoming History to Improve Missouri's Roads

The history of highway funding in Missouri is a complicated story involving an unusually large state transportation system and inadequate levels of funding that until recently had left our highway department ill-equipped to address the state's transportation needs. But because of renewed efforts to shore up transportation funding, Missouri is starting to move forward — toward safer roads, improved commercial performance and greater economic development. While much more needs to be done, a look back at how we got where we are is important as we plan for the future.

Although Missouri is not one of the nation's largest states either in terms of population or area, we do have one of the nation's largest state-funded road systems. Missouri is ranked 17th in population and 21st in area; however, our state ranks sixth nationally in total roadway miles and non-national highway miles.

The main reason for this is that during the 1950s there was a campaign to bring nearly every home within a couple miles of a paved road. This "Takeover Program" resulted in approximately 12,000 miles of supplementary roads, which 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. However, 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 proposed tax hikes for roads, and we found ourselves with decaying highways and bridges and not enough money to fix them.

However, in 2004 things began to change with the passage of the Amendment 3 proposal, which received wide approval. Under the plan, certain funds from vehicle sales taxes and gasoline taxes are now earmarked for MoDOT.

The Smooth Roads Initiative, the first phase of the department's Smoother, Safer, Sooner Campaign, will utilize \$1.7 billion in new funding to bring up to good condition 2,200 miles of Missouri's roads and highways by the end of this year.

Despite a troubled past, MoDOT is restoring its credibility by showing Missourians tangible results. However, there is much work that remains to be done. We must move forward with solid plans to continue rebuilding and expanding our major commercial arteries, such as Interstate 70, which needs immediate attention. Next week, this column will discuss the future of Missouri's transportation system.

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.mo.gov or by phone at (888) 711-9278.

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