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Better Roads for All of Us

Previously, we talked about some of the road and bridge projects in and around the Kansas City area that you need to watch out for, but in the end, will make for better roads for us all. This week, I'd like to talk about some of the recent success we've had in fixing our highways all over the state and the prospects for the future.

Last year, The Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) completed its Smooth Roads Initiative, a program to deliver smoother pavement, brighter striping, rumble stripes, and other safety improvements on 2,200 miles of Missouri's most heavily traveled highways. The program was a rousing success as it was completed in December — one year ahead of schedule. Roads in the state saw a major upgrade to their conditions from just 47 percent considered in good condition in 2004 to 74 percent now considered good. MoDOT officials want 85 percent of our busiest highways in good condition by 2011. A recent survey of truckers nationwide said that Interstates 44 and 70 are among the nation's most improved highways.

While the roads were made smoother, they were also made safer. Engineers have installed nearly 500 miles of guard cable between the lanes of traffic of our divided highways including I-435 in the Kansas City area, I-29 between Kansas City and St. Joseph, the entire I-70 corridor to St. Louis, as well as I-44 and St. Louis' I-55. These guard cables prevent deadly crossover accidents that used to take more than 400 lives a year and injure another 2,400 along the state's major interstates. With the cables installed along I-70 alone, cross-median fatalities went from 24 in 2002 (before installation) to just two last year.

While MoDOT has done a good job improving conditions throughout the state, there are some big potential potholes on its road to continued success. The biggest issue facing the agency is money. MoDOT has been able to buy itself some funding time the past couple of years with the passage of Amendment Three — a voter-approved measure that makes sure gas tax dollars are spent on road and bridge projects. The money gained from Amendment Three has helped finance the Smooth Roads Initiative, but it is about to run out. In 2008, construction spending will be \$1.23 billion. By 2010, the amount drops dramatically to just \$569 million. This means a funding shortfall for the agency of \$18 billion over the next 20 years.

In some ways, MoDOT is on the verge of becoming a victim of its own success. By scraping together enough funds to effectively patch a number of highly visible roads, the underlying reality

that the current funding stream will quickly be outpaced by the costs of maintaining our transportation system and providing for necessary expansions like a rebuilt I-70 has been masked.

MoDOT has worked hard to stretch its limited resources as far as they will go but a permanent fix is needed. Various plans exist, including my plan to rebuild I-70 with toll roads, but at this point neither voters or elected officials have settled on any particular proposal. The one thing we do know is that finding a permanent solution to the very real funding gap faced by MoDOT will be one of the most hotly contested public policy issues of the foreseeable future.

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. My web address is <http://www.senate.mo.gov/bartle>.