

State road funding needs must be heard

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Money, money, money. The S.C. Department of Transportation needs it to maintain one of the nation's largest state-supported road systems, but South Carolina's gasoline tax is among the country's lowest. The state's chief executive says officials need to spend money smarter, not tax more to repair roads.

Heck, we're at the point that a West Columbia lawmaker wants to establish a charitable fund to fix potholes. Is this any way to run a highway system?

The department is moving on tolls for interstates 95, 20 and 26 and the still-to-be-built Interstate 73. But for the existing roads, that takes legislative action, not easy to do with a tax-averse legislature and governor.

Transportation executive director Buck Limehouse is correct that the department needs to earn the trust of elected officials and taxpayers. The poor management that resulted in the wasting of more than \$50 million was sufficiently detailed last year in an S.C. Legislative Audit Council report. But other analyses show that the department not only needs to use its current resources more wisely, it also needs more money to get the job done.

Limehouse suggested to officials in Richland and Lexington counties last month that they would have to step up and provide some of the money to complete road projects if they wanted them completed on their timetable.

Beaufort County taxpayers are familiar with that concept. Last November, voters agreed to a 1 percent sales tax to raise more than \$150 million for road projects in the county. And we helped pay for the widening of 13 miles of S.C. 170 through an earlier sales tax.

Reports released in August showed that South Carolina has \$3 billion in unmet bridge repair and maintenance work and that it would take about \$150 million a year for the next 20 years to fix the problem. And that is just the money needed for bridges; it doesn't include roads.

Clearly, South Carolina needs more money to invest in road projects and maintenance, and an increase in the 16-cent gasoline tax that hasn't changed in 20 years would help. The gasoline tax is a user tax that taps most of the people who travel our roads, residents and visitors.

The governor also is right. We need to be smarter about how we spend the money we have. South Carolina needs comprehensive plans that get agencies and local governments to work together to offer more mass transit options.

Of course, discussion of more money for roads and other public projects, a gasoline tax hike or improved public transit systems probably will fall on deaf ears during the legislative session that starts Jan. 8. It is, after all, an election year, with all 170 seats in the General Assembly up for grabs -- never a good time to expect lawmakers to bite the bullet on taxes and make long overdue funding decisions.

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