

## S. Dakota Infrastructure Can Benefit from Stimulus

By Dennis Slater, Association of Equipment Manufacturers, President and Secretary

For the economic health and quality of life of the state, South Dakotans should heed the recent report on ground transportation offered by The Road Information Program.

The report, "Future Mobility in South Dakota," (see [www.tripnet.org](http://www.tripnet.org)), shows that in the Mount Rushmore State about one third of the major roads and highways are deficient.

TRIP estimates that South Dakota motorists each pay \$319 annually for wear on their cars resulting from substandard roads, and the state has averaged 168 traffic deaths annually in recent years. Costs like this are an economic hardship and safety concern in a state where the ability to drive is so critical to families and to business prosperity.

The state's bridges fared no better. Some 21 percent were structurally deficient in 2008 - fifth worst in the nation. Structurally deficient means significant deterioration of the bridge deck, supports or other major components. Such bridges are so deteriorated they are "often posted for lower weight or closed to traffic, restricting or redirecting large vehicles, including commercial trucks and emergency services vehicles." At some point, such bridges are unsafe at any speed.

In the area of economic growth, global competitiveness is critical to South Dakota business, especially agribusiness, and that means well-maintained roads and bridges. Others certainly recognize the importance of transportation investment for economic advantage. For instance, recent figures show that China has been investing 9 percent of its gross domestic product in infrastructure versus our 0.93 percent of GDP investment.

The good news and the bad news are the same. You get what you pay for. No one likes to contemplate an increase in the gas tax or any

other fee, which is bound to be politically unpopular in South Dakota, as it is everywhere. However, when asked if they would pay increased taxes to get better roads, people often respond "yes."

And that's where the TRIP report comes in. This data should help state residents see the huge benefits to transportation improvements.

Although the recently signed economic stimulus package will provide some relief, that is not the same as really fixing the problems. Every funding option must be on the table: toll roads, user fees, public private partnerships, bonds, sales, property taxes, income taxes, etc.

South Dakota has been living on borrowed time when it comes to its roads and bridges. No politician wants to mount the podium and announce new taxes. But do they want to be asked publicly, for example if a disastrous bridge failure occurs, why they didn't do something about the disintegrating infrastructure?

Road quality is a topic in which the Association of Equipment Manufacturers has a long-standing interest. AEM was founded in the 1890s by farmers who needed better quality roads and bridges to ensure they could deliver their goods to market. It's true that road and bridge repair and building projects create needed jobs, but looking at the broader scope, good transportation quality is all about economic survival, safety and our high standard of living.

*Dennis Slater, 50, of Milwaukee is president and secretary of the Association of Equipment Manufacturers, whose role is to provide trade association services on a global basis for its member companies.*