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Attention to N.C. Roads Would Help Commuters, Create Jobs

The following op-ed piece by AEM President Dennis Slater was published in the April 14, 2010, edition of the Charlotte (North Carolina) Observer:

Is there any doubt that North Carolina's roads and bridges need to be upgraded? That's a good question, because quality of life and job creation are at stake in the answer. According to a report released in March by The Road Information [Program], the financial loss to state residents caused by poor surface infrastructure is $5.7 billion annually.

If you're an average motorist in Charlotte, degraded surface infrastructure personally costs you $1,351 each year; in Raleigh-Durham, $1,350; in Greensboro-Winston-Salem, $901. Those numbers are computed based on the combined costs of traffic congestion, unsafe roads and vehicle repairs from driving on poor roads.

Not only would motorists benefit from infrastructure projects, jobs would be created. The Federal Highway Administration says that for every $1 billion invested in 2007 for highway construction, about 27,800 jobs are created.

Such job creation would be welcome news in North Carolina, a state with an unemployment rate that rocketed from 4.9 percent in January 2008 to 11.2 percent in January 2010. And just think what it would mean to spend that $5.7 billion on infrastructure instead of on time lost in traffic, accidents and car repairs. Such an investment could mean a total of 158,000 jobs.

And if roads seem congested now, just wait. The Road Information [Program] estimates that "travel on North Carolina's roads and highways will increase 45 percent by 2030, to approximately 145 billion miles of travel." The quality-of-life costs can be measured in the time wasted now each year in traffic — 40 hours in the Charlotte area. And that will only go up.

While Charlotte motorists are idling in slow-moving traffic, they have time to remember that they are not just competing against businesses in other states, they are fighting to survive in a global economy. Unfortunately, other nations "get it" better than the U.S. does.

According to a 2008 Urban Land Institute report produced with Ernst & Young, China invests 9 percent of its gross domestic product in infrastructure versus 0.93 percent of GDP invested in the U.S. Who will have the best transportation for manufacturers to get products to market? Will it be China or will it be the U.S. and North Carolina?

In a state such as North Carolina, with significant military installations, it shouldn't be hard to remember there is more in play with infrastructure than economics. Global stature is at stake. The ULI says that "during its ascendance to superpower status from 1910 to 1970, the United States invested massively in its infrastructure: expanding ports, building extensive road systems, leading in airport design, erecting dams, laying down power grids, and constructing water treatment facilities."

Will North Carolinians decide to improve the state's infrastructure and stay in the game?

The choice in North Carolina and across the U.S. is stark. We can find ways to fund desperately needed surface infrastructure improvements and create jobs, or we can continue to allow our economic well-being to slip away while our quality of life diminishes.