End of the road: No funding solution in sight for infrastructure woes

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1:29 a.m. That's how long it takes the average Hattiesburg-area driver loses each year by driving on deficient roads and bridges in Forrest and Lamar counties.

The estimate from the national transportation research group TRIP is based on additional vehicle operating costs, congestion-related delays and traffic crashes suffered by drivers who are forced to travel on poorly maintained state, county and municipal roads and bridges.

"If we continue down the path we're on, it's going to get worse before it gets better," said David Hogan, president of the Forrest County Board of Supervisors. "Our revenue has not increased as quickly as the rising cost of road paving and bridge maintenance."

"I have confidence in our state and federal leaders that we are going to work together to address this most important obligation that we have as elected officials to provide safe roads and bridges for the taxpayers of Mississippi."

As chairman of the board of directors for the Mississippi Association of Supervisors, Hogan was behind an effort last winter to publicize the drastic need for more funding for road and bridge repair and maintenance in the state. The association, along with the Mississippi Association of County Engineers, held a series of meetings statewide to emphasize the infrastructure challenges counties are facing.

According to the engineers' association, 76 percent of the 52,000 miles of county roads in the state need pavement maintenance, with 46 percent in poor or very poor condition. Thirty percent of county bridges cannot carry legal loads. TRIP says 28 percent of roads in the Hattiesburg urban area are in poor condition.

Hogan had hoped the special legislative session Gov. Phil Bryant scheduled to start Monday would bring some relief. But, although lawmakers are set to approve a budget for the Mississippi Department of Transportation, the agenda doesn't include any other new stream of infrastructure funding.

Bryant has said he was open to lawmakers dealing with the state's transportation issues during a special session to debate that question. Legislative leaders have been meeting before the special session to try to work out a deal to address the transportation needs we have today, much less the needs of the future."

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The economic council suggested $300 million should go to state-owned bridge and road upkeep and $37.5 million each should go to counties and cities. Local officials have said they need much more money to do what they can do now.

"We don't want anything like that to happen again," said Scott Waller, interim president and CEO of the Mississippi Economic Council. "We are definitely not bringing in enough dollars to address the transportation needs we have today, much less the needs of the future."

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"We do have a big impact on the economy, not just in the ability to attract companies, but we know you'd see about 4,000 jobs created in the construction industry if you went to road and bridge investment," he said. "Over time, as you put the money into there and the infrastructure was improved, you'd see 7,000 jobs in all sectors."

"We're ready to do something," he said. "We just need action from a legislative standpoint."

"If it doesn't happen (this special session), hopefully it will happen next session. There have been efforts going on in other states, and they're getting it done. People are moving forward and we're waiting. It's a difficult task, but it needs to get done."

By the numbers

$1,293: Cost per year to average Hattiesburg car owner because of driving on bad roads

$640: Increase in costs to Mississippi drivers if roads not improved

28 percent: Major roads in Hattiesburg urban area that are in poor condition

46 percent: County roads in poor or very poor condition

20 percent: Mississippi bridges in need of repair

13 hours: Time lost by Hattiesburg drivers per year due to traffic congestion

$375 million: Money needed each year in new revenue to address Mississippi transportation needs

0: Increase in funding for infrastructure in last 30 years

Source: TRIP and Mississippi Association of Supervisors