

CM says Issue 1 critical for roads

by [David Showers](#) | Monday, September 21, 2020



An LFG Enterprises Inc. employee works on installing a new traffic signal at the intersection of Lakeside Road and Malvern Avenue across from Hot Springs Country Club in the 2000 block Friday. The Arkansas Department of Transportation was overseeing the work. - Photo by Richard Rasmussen of The Sentinel-Record

A report released last week on the condition of area roads was "eye-opening," Hot Springs City Manager Bill Burrough said.

The Arkansas Transportation by the Numbers: Meeting the State's Need for Safe, Smooth and Efficient Mobility report the Arkansas Good Roads/Transportation Council commissioned said 34% of area roads are in poor condition, costing drivers on average \$1,298 annually in vehicle operation expenses, crashes and time and fuel lost to congestion.

TRIP, a nonprofit transportation research firm, released the report six weeks before voters decide if the 0.50% state sales tax supporting highway and local road construction will become a permanent levy. The tax will sunset in 2023 if Issue 1 on the Nov. 3 ballot doesn't pass. According to information from the Arkansas Department of Transportation, the tax has raised more than \$2 billion for road projects since voters approved it in the 2012 general election, including \$78 million for the widening of Highway 70 east.

The state Chamber of Commerce, trucking, road construction, engineering, banking and agriculture interests are among those who have raised more than \$2 million in support of Issue 1's passage, according to finance reports Vote For Roads Vote for Issue 1 filed with the Arkansas Ethics Commission. Oaklawn Racing Casino Resort contributed \$50,000.

The national and state chapters of Americans for Prosperity formed the No Permanent Tax No on Issue 1 ballot question committee earlier this month. The Garland County Tea Party and Garland County Tax Alliance are also members of the committee, according to its statement of organization.

Burrough said TRIP's report included state and county maintained roads but conceded many of the 300 miles of city-

maintained streets are in need of repairs that outstrip the city's funding capacity.

"There are plenty of city streets that need to have more work done than what we allocate now," he said.

Burrough said the street overview the city recently commissioned showed 27 miles of its inventory were in critical or lost condition. Another 163 miles were classified as fair. Ninety-five miles were found to be in good condition and 14 in excellent condition.

The Hot Springs Board of Directors will hear a report on the overview following its Sept. 29 agenda meeting, Burrough said.

"Those fair streets still have issues," he said. "We know we've got to take care of those to keep those from getting into a critical or lost condition. We've got about 27 miles of streets that are either critical or already lost. Once you lose a street you have to start from scratch, and it costs more to rebuild a road than to keep up with your overlay. It's an expensive venture."

Turnback money the city receives from the 0.50% sales tax funds a large part of the roughly \$1 million it allocates to its annual paving budget, which overlays about 6 miles a year.

"I think a key point residents need to know is what happens should the 0.50% sales tax not become permanent and expires," Burrough said. "That funding still has to come from somewhere. In our case, that would mean either a reduction of service in other areas or an ad valorem tax. Hot Springs is one of four cities that doesn't have a property tax in the incorporated area. We still have to pave streets. So that's either going to come at a reduction of service in other areas or another revenue stream."

Street paving and road improvements ranked third out of 18 priorities the city board established for 2021. Burrough said city directors tasked him with doubling the annual paving budget and developing a plan to pave the 27 miles of critical and lost roads within five years. Burrough said based on current costs, repairing that mileage would cost \$31 million.

"That's quite a challenge, but it's one we're going to be looking at to see what options might be available to help us do that," he said. "From what I heard from the board, that's probably the number one concern they hear from constituents."

Most of the city's arterial corridors are federal and state roads, but the city has accepted segments into its maintenance inventory. Malvern Avenue from East Grand to Spring is part of that inventory, allowing the city to pursue its Malvern Avenue Gateway and District Plan that envisions pedestrian plazas, sculpture gardens, bike lanes and green infrastructure for the southern approach into downtown.

Burrough said accepting Central Avenue from East Grand to the Park and Whittington junction would facilitate implementation of the Downtown Economic Development and Redevelopment Action Plan the board adopted in 2016. The 96-page plan called for wider sidewalks allowing more outdoor dining and walking opportunities.