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EDITORIAL: Futuristic actions

by NEMS Daily Journal

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A generation of Mississippians has grown to adulthood since the 1987 Highway Program, the first statewide four-laning commitment, began transforming a 1930s-era primary road system into modern arteries.

Most of that first commitment to four-lane more than 1,000 miles of roads from the hills of Northeast Mississippi to the beaches of the Gulf Coast succeeded, but it did not include and did not contain money for other proven road needs. Most of those were taken into a continuation of the 1987 program in 2002. Called Vision 21, it added more than 1,000 additional miles of four-lane commitments, in staged priorities, to the highway map.

Unlike the 1987 program, it lacked anything close to adequate funding for the job, and its higher costs, driven by inflation, were funded by the same 18-cent-per-gallon tax that built '87 program roads.

The \$200 million per-year revenue to build Vision 21 highways will build them □ in 100 years or more.

The groundswell of popular, civic and legislative support that supported the '87 program also passed increased fuel taxes to build it. The reason Mississippi could build highways in a timely way statewide for the first time in history was a doubling of the state fuel tax: 9 cents to 18 cents per gallon for gasoline and diesel fuel over the span of three fiscal years.

We concede, as do many legislators and others who strongly support highway construction, that raising taxes on anything for anything during the recession will be politically and psychologically difficult.

However, delaying and doing nothing but turning a blind eye accomplishes nothing.

At the very least the Legislature, in partnership with the state's civic leadership, should study how we will complete the Vision 21 program when the time is ripe, and how much money will be required. The cost increases almost every day.

We agree with all who say that the way Mississippi taxes motor fuels should be examined. The 18 cents per gallon, while not insignificant, arguably will not raise enough if traditional methods are used to bond and build. So, study a percentage tax and how it might build a wall against inflationary pressure in road construction.

Consider the GetSMART highway advocacy group's idea to use private-public agreements through an independent Transportation Bank to finance construction. And, yes, it would require rerouting where the revenue stream goes, in part. There is nothing sacred about any agency method for building highways.. Brilliant people can be tied in knots by inefficiency. At least give a full, light-of-day hearing to the GetSMART (Start Mississippi's Approved Roads Today) idea.

Put down partisan dueling guns for long enough to listen to all the opinions – respectfully, civilly, and with public transparency. As so many who hold the

public's funds so dear say, "It is the taxpayers' money."

We also agree with those who say Mississippi must have the best information about projected fuel consumption. How soon will hybrids and electric vehicles play a major or even predominant part in surface transportation for average citizens? When that happens, how will we finance highways as revenues from conventional fuel taxes drastically decline as consumption drops?

Our nation still has an enormous appetite for oil from all over the world, but strong arguments have been made that the century of oil – the 20th century – was the apex for that transformative fuel. What realistically is the timetable for oil becoming scarcer as a market commodity – at any price?

The private sector started years ago studying the economic and strategic dynamics of changes in transportation. The \$4 per gallon gas shock of 2008 more widely drove home the point.

Mississippi is an oil producing state, and we have other energy resources, too.

How does our state plan its place in the energy future?

Serious and intentionally guided study, at least, should be initiated in the 2010 legislative session.

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