

Hall: Obama's focus could cost Mississippi

MDOT Central District commissioner says state highways have serious federal funding issues

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The road to building and improving highways and other infrastructure in Mississippi will be getting a lot bumpier next year.

That's because federal investments in highways and transit systems are expected to decline by more than \$15 billion in 2010, according to analysis of transportation spending trends conducted by the Associated General Contractors of America.

A former state legislator, Dick Hall serves as central district commissioner for the Mississippi Department of Transportation. Slashes made to federal highway funding are troubling, he says.

"We've got some serious, serious problems with infrastructure in this country taking a back seat," said Hall. "The Obama administration is focused on healthcare and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. (States) feel helpless waiting on Congress to act. In Mississippi, our (highway) construction budget will be cut in half if something isn't done in Washington."

Hall says that the state receives \$400-450 million a year for highway projects, and another \$400 million generated from state

sales tax revenues.

"In the meantime, the State of Mississippi is losing about \$15 million a month in funding from the federal government," said Hall. "If (legislative) action is not taken soon, we stand to lose \$200 million by the end of next year. This is truly a serious situation for the infrastructure in our state."

Non-stimulus federal transportation funds are stuck at near current levels because Congress failed to pass a six-year surface transportation bill to replace legislation that expired at the end of September.

As executive director of the Mississippi Road Builders Association, Mike Pepper believes without a reauthorization of federal highway legislation, state roads and bridges will continue to deteriorate, with or without stimulus money.

"Most folks are under the misconception that the stimulus package last year went for infrastructure," he said. "Only 3-4 percent of that went to roads and bridges. We've continued the (federal surface transportation) program only on infusions, which does not allow stability and assured funding measures to plan for transportation needs."

The estimated 19.3 percent drop in federal formula and stimulus funding for transporta-

tion projects next year is likely to force over 430,000 layoffs throughout the country.

The nation's construction unemployment rate currently stands at 18.7 percent.

"Work projects are ready to go in the state, but with the lack of commitment and stability from the feds, our members are struggling to keep their workforce," said Pepper. "Many members have had to lay off employees, while others are hoping they can survive the winter in hope of a good thing."

Pepper says his organization is working to encourage Congress to enact a six-year reauthorization bill and is asking state legislators to approve a \$300-million bond bill.

"The bond bill would provide immediate improvements to 25 percent of the state's bridges that are deficient," he said. "The bond bill would also help the state achieve



Hall



Obama

the goal of having 75 percent of our major roads in good condition."

In Mississippi, there are 4,201 bridges that are deficient or functionally obsolete, which ranks eighth highest in the nation, and only 42 percent of the state's roads are in good condition, says Pepper.

According to the analysis, the federal government invested \$78.6 billion in road and transit construction projects in 2009. That funding included \$51 billion in regular federal transportation funding and \$27.6 billion in stimulus funding. The stimulus funds represent 74 percent of the total amount of transportation funds included in the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act earlier this year.

Next year, however, federal funding for highway and transit construction will only total \$63.4 billion, approximately \$9.8 billion of which will come from the remaining stimulus transportation funds, and the rest from regular transportation funding.

"Last year, \$30 million was diverted to other needs in the state budget other than transportation," Pepper said. "We cannot continue to allow the fuel tax/user fee to be diverted to uses other than transportation needs."