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## Many bridges needed

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By HARLAN KIRGAN

The state's most critical transportation need is replacing local bridges, according to Larry "Butch" Brown, executive director of the Mississippi Department of Transportation.

Unlike the multimillion-dollar, high-rise spans on U.S. 90, the bridges that Brown referred to largely go unnoticed until traffic cannot cross there.

"The county road bridges are probably the ones that need to be addressed the most and quickest," he said.

The state has 10,923 local bridges, according to John Harper, an assistant administrator in the Office of State Aid Road Construction. These bridges are not part of the interstate or state highway systems.

Engineers routinely evaluate and rate these bridges on a scale up to 100. A score of 50 or lower deems bridges ready for repair, replacement or a posting to advise drivers of a reduced load limit.

Twenty-four percent of the bridges 2,663 counted in the state aid system have a rating of 50 or lower, Harper said.

Replacing these bridges would cost nearly \$666 million based on an average replacement cost of \$250,000, he said.

Only 12 of the 180 bridges in Jackson County on the list score 50 or lower, according to the state aid system's Web site.

Of George County's 71 bridges on the list, 10 are rated at 50 or below.

George County can usually manage to replace one bridge a year, according to Bob Diamond, an engineer with Batson & Brown. He is a county state aid engineer for Jackson, George and Greene counties.

Presently, the Crossroads Merrill Bridge in George County is waiting for funding, Diamond said. In the planning stages, meanwhile, are bridges at Brushy Creek, Holly Road and Ernest Pipkins, he said.

Diamond said that rural counties lack the tax base to afford extensive bridge replacements and repairs.

By contrast, Jackson County plans to replace or repair a dozen bridges in the next year, said Manly Barton, president of the Board of Supervisors. The county has allocated \$2 million for bridgework, he said.

Bridges planned for repair or replacement are on Beach Boulevard in Pascagoula, Old Spanish Trail in Gautier, Robert Hiram Drive in Gautier, Bay Avenue in Moss Point, Cook Road-Daisy Vestry, Grand Bature Road, Shingle Mill Landing Road, Hospital Street in Pascagoula, Coventry

Drive in Escatawpa, Blackfoot Road, Ocean Springs Road culvert and the Miss. 63 culvert, he said.

Brown said that local bridges now must carry more weight than years ago.

"The trucks are so much bigger now days than they were in the past and they are riding on those roads that were not built for that capacity," he said.

Keeping the weak links in the state's transportation system from collapsing are three programs. The state aid system is funded for \$51 million next year, said Fred Hollis of the state aid office. Another \$20 million is available from the Local System Bridge Replacement and Rehabilitation Program. The federal government will chip in \$15 million for bridges, but that isn't earmarked solely for local bridges, he said.

Hollis pointed out the state aid program operates under the governor's office rather than MDOT.

Local bridges in the 82 counties carry a "really big impact," said Diamond. "Those are the bridges that impact school buses, local traffic and overall safety for the public."

Jackson and George counties have sufficient postings on bridges to keep them open, he said. "Now the day may come that there may be a gravel truck or some other heavy truck come across them that could damage them," he said.

Diamond agreed with Brown that the state's local bridge needs are critical.

"The only time we get any kind of eye from the Legislature is when there is some tragedy that makes some front page news," Diamond said. "In the past, Wayne County has had a bridge fall in and people get killed on it. Just thank goodness we haven't had that locally."

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