



## Mississippi's roads and bridges demand our immediate attention

**Mike Pepper**

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— If you are one of the 1.8 million drivers in Mississippi, you probably don't think much about the road you travel each day. That is until you hit a pothole, the most common sign of a poor road.

The bad news: Mississippi's roads and bridges today pose far more serious problems than potholes. According to TRIP (The Road Information Program), a nonprofit research organization which gathers technical data on America's transportation system, a growing number of Mississippi's roads and bridges are in dire need of repairs or improvements. Not only are bad roads uncomfortable to drive on, they can cause damage to vehicles or even accidents.

Bridges are crossed each day by motorists who don't give them a second thought. Motorists cross Mississippi's 17,000 bridges every day – and each time they bet their lives that the bridge will do its job.

TRIP reports that 25% of the state's bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. This translates to 4,201 bridges, the eighth highest in the nation. Bridges must be maintained, upgraded or even replaced when they become outdated or damaged. Allowing any bridge to deteriorate below safety limits can have catastrophic results. Likewise, many suburban-area bridges carry more loads than a decade ago due to population shifts. These bridges need upgrades to handle increased load and vehicle capacity.

Safety and comfort are not the only issues. Poor roads and bridges affect commercial, business and economic interests. Companies looking to locate their operations here look closely to make sure roads are efficient, reliable and safe. At the beginning of last year, 17 percent of Mississippi roads were rated in poor condition and 23 percent rated in mediocre condition.

The goal for most states is to have 75 percent of major roads in good condition. Unfortunately, only 42 percent of Mississippi's roads are in good condition, and the prospects are poor for improving on that statistic.

Mississippi currently has a \$6 billion funding shortfall for maintaining or rebuilding our roads and bridges. This means the Mississippi Department of Transportation (MDOT) cannot meet the enormous need. Meanwhile, MDOT is fighting to keep the funds it has, as state legislators have diverted millions in fuel tax revenues to other programs from an already insufficient road and bridge budget.

Looking ahead, MDOT estimates that \$12.5 billion will be needed between 2007 and 2016 to improve road and bridge conditions, relieve congestion, and make safety improvements. Unfortunately, only \$6.5 billion will be available and some improvements must be indefinitely postponed. A one-time \$320 million stimulus funding will help, but that represents merely a fraction of what is needed to complete upgrades and enhancements.

Among the current needs that may have to wait:

- Expand Mississippi Highway 15 from two to four lanes, from Interstate 20 to Tennessee State Line.
- Hattiesburg and Jackson beltways to reduce congestion.
- Four lanes along Mississippi Highway 601 from Interstate 10 to Wiggins (connectivity to Gulf Coast, aiding hurricane evacuation).
- Interstate 69/269 from the Arkansas state line to the Tennessee state line.
- 10 miles of U.S. Highway 49 from Star to Interstate 20, east of Jackson.
- Several sections of U.S. Highway 15, including 20 miles from Shady Grove to Bay Springs.
- Eight miles of SR 603 from Town Road to Hancock
- Highway 6 North, from Batesville to Pontotoc and Tupelo.
- Sixteen miles of U.S. Highway 82, from Mississippi River bridge to Highway 61.

These are just a few of the many road and bridge needs in Mississippi. Meanwhile, traffic on these roads continues to increase. Mississippi's population has increased 14 percent since 1990, and expected to increase another 105,000 residents by the year 2020, and most of those will bring additional traffic to our roads and bridges.

As our state's leaders struggle with this and other budgetary issues facing our state, we should make the state's roads and bridges one of our highest priorities. Supplemental funding mechanisms, such as general obligation bonds and other

income sources, should be closely examined as a way to shore up shortfalls in road and bridge budgets.

We cannot afford to neglect our roads and bridges. We can improve the current situation, but we must recognize the growing need and look to new and creative solutions.

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