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Roads, bridges should be priority

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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.

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 percent of the state's bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. This translates to 4,201 bridges. Bridges must be maintained, upgraded or even replaced when they become outdated or damaged. Safety and comfort are not the only issues. Poor roads and bridges affect commercial, business and economic interests. 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 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 15 from two to four lanes, from I-20 to Tennessee State Line.
- Hattiesburg and Jackson beltways to reduce congestion.
- Four lanes along Mississippi 601 from Interstate 10 to Wiggins (connectivity to Gulf Coast, aiding hurricane evacuation).
- Interstate 6 9/269 from the Arkansas state line to the Tennessee state line.
- 10 miles of U.S. 49 from Star to Interstate 20, east of Jackson.
- Several sections of U.S. 15, including 20 miles from Shady Grove to Bay Springs.
- Eight miles of Mississippi 603 from Town Road to Hancock

- Mississippi 6 North, from Batesville to Pontotoc and Tupelo.
- Sixteen miles of U.S. 82, from Mississippi River bridge to Highway 61.

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. 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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