



County Commission Communications

A Periodic Column Written by Ed Douglas, Presiding Commissioner

PAY ME NOW OR PAY ME LATER

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One of the responsibilities of the County Commission is maintaining our road and bridge system in the county. Our bridge crew maintains the nearly 300 bridges in the county, and we disburse what is known as CART rock money to each of our 13 townships to help maintain the nearly 600 miles of road in the county. I have additional interests in our road and bridge system in that I previously served as a Commissioner for six years on the Missouri Highway and Transportation Commission and am currently President of the Highway 36/72 Corridor Group.

Recently, I attended a Northwest Regional Transportation Training in Trenton. At that meeting, the Interim Director of the Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) and other District and Regional Engineers from MoDOT went into great detail on the plight of our Missouri road system. Here are a few pieces of information from that meeting.

Missouri has the 7th largest road system in the nation based on road miles maintained with over 33,000 miles in the system. This is more miles than Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa combined. Yet, we are 46th in the nation on revenue per mile and again 46th in the nation in fuel tax per gallon. Our contract awards to contractors to rebuild and maintain roads in Missouri is only \$14,729 per mile compared to over \$70,000 per mile for Nebraska and Kansas.

Recently, the Governor and the legislature considered legislation to allow a 2 cent per gallon increase in the state fuel tax. This would have allowed us to continue to match federal fuel tax money sent back to the state on a one dollar of state money for four dollars of federal money match. But, for whatever reason, the process bogged down, and no legislation was passed. As a result, MoDOT projects that it will not be able to match federal funds beginning in 2016 creating a \$161 million shortfall in 2016 and \$399 million in 2017 and beyond. MoDOT projects that it will have \$325 million to maintain our current system on an ongoing basis which is \$165 million short just of maintaining the current system. As a result, going forward MoDOT will only be maintaining the primary system which amounts to nearly one north/south and one east/west highway in each county. For us, this means Highways 36 and 65 will be maintained, but all the numbered roads (190 for us) and lettered roads (as well as bridges on these roads) will get no more work other than patch work going forward. This means our system will, over time, continue to deteriorate. Although this has not been said officially by anyone at MoDOT, when I questioned a MoDOT representative about the BRO money (Bridge and Road Off system) our county receives through the state from federal dollars, she indicated that possibly this could be affected over time. For our county, this could mean a loss of up to \$200,000 per year. Finally, it should be noted that Missouri has over 10,000 state bridges (Missouri has lots of rivers and waterways), a number of which are also in need of costly repairs.

I know that very few people like new taxes. I understand this. However, with people driving more fuel-efficient cars, the gas tax on an inflation-adjusted basis has been going down, while construction materials for roads like steel and concrete and asphalt continue to go up. So, it takes a higher fuel tax just to stay even. Also, there is the argument that we should spend money more efficiently. I get that also; however, in the last five years MoDOT has reduced staff by 1196 people, closed 124 facilities in the state, and reduced equipment by 752 pieces for a total savings of \$605 million, all of which went to the roads and bridges. So I believe MoDOT has done nearly all they can do on the expense side.

I think it is important that we strongly encourage our representatives (Senator David Pearce and Representative Mike Lair) to increase the fuel tax as soon as possible or at the very least put it on the ballot for a vote of the people for three very important reasons. Number 1) We will be forfeiting \$167 million of federal funds in 2016 and \$399 million each year after to other states if no new funding is available. Number 2) As roads and bridges deteriorate, the average cost to repair each individual car will also continue to increase (currently the cost to each motorist annually is over \$400 per year from driving on rough roads). Number 3) Finally, I know from my years with the Highway Commission that the cost to maintain roads is much cheaper than the cost to rebuild roads once they deteriorate past a certain point. In fact, the difference in cost to rebuild a road over routine repair costs is exponential (which means it can be 10 times as much as the repair costs).

For those three reasons, I think it is wise for us to remember the old Fram oil filter commercial showing a mechanic holding a new oil filter that a motorist could have purchased, but instead the motorist is having to have the mechanic rebuild his burned out engine. And his line is "You can pay me now (for the oil filter) or pay me later (for the rebuilt engine)." There is always a cost to any tax increase which is never popular, but in this case after examining the data, I believe the cost of inaction is significantly greater.



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