

Road projects need \$29 billion more

BY CHARLES SOWELL

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The numbers are daunting.
The stakes are high.

The state's transportation system lies at the base of booming economic growth, particularly in the Upstate where the names posted on mailboxes along the Interstate 85 corridor read like a who's who of South Carolina business.

South Carolina's Department of Transportation predicts they will need \$48 billion to meet South Carolina's transportation needs through the year 2030 in their draft Comprehensive Multimodal Long-Range Transportation Plan.

Under current funding formulas they will have \$19 billion.

That leaves a \$29 billion shortfall.

No one knows where the money will come from.

"I don't think much of DOT's plan," said Angela Viney, director of the sustainable communities program at Upstate Forever. "Indeed, it's not really a plan at all, but a summary of needs."

Many of those needs are pretty severely out of whack, Viney and others say.

"When DOT talks about light rail systems, I tend to zone them out," said Greenville County Councilman Willis Meadows during a recent presentation by

state transportation officials in Greenville.

"They don't have the money to maintain the roads they have, much less build all these fabulous overpasses and train systems."

Critics of DOT and the state Legislature often cite the state's anemic gasoline tax and the flat revenue it produces.

According to SouthCarolinaGasPrices.com, South Carolina falls in the lower end of the pack nationwide on gasoline taxes. The state charges 35.2 cents per gallon for gasoline and 41.2 cents per gallon for diesel. There is also a quarter-cent per gallon inspection fee and a half-cent per gallon environmental fee. In most states, fuel taxes are in the high 40s on a cents-per gallon basis.

Highest-in-the-nation California charges 63.9 cents per gallon for gasoline and 72.0 cents per gallon for diesel. Lowest are Alaska's miniscule fuel taxes: 26.4 cents for gas and 32.4 cents for diesel.

Gasoline prices across the state have passed \$3 a gallon and experts don't foresee them dropping back below \$3 again anytime soon, if ever. Most observers see little stomach in the Legislature to raise the gasoline tax with prices like that at the pump. Details and a state by state listing are available at www.southcarolinagasprices.com/tax_info.aspx.

Funding issues aside, from the state's

point of view, there are numbers coming out of Columbia on just what the state's poorly maintained highway system costs business and consumers each year.

In terms of money lost due to delays in the Upstate alone, over \$36 million was lost in 2006 based on more than 2 million hours lost on clogged highways and byways.

And, the state's transportation study says, just to keep traffic congestion at 2006 levels would require building 17,000 lane miles of additional roads. That's the equivalent of an eight-lane highway from South Carolina to California.

Conservation groups such as Upstate Forever push for more funding for mass transit.

"We spend one-quarter of a cent per gallon of our gas-tax money on public transportation," Viney said. "That's incredibly low."

But if the goal is efficiency, say other critics, mass transit is only part of the solution. DOT reports the state spends \$7,297 per highway mile on state maintenance of roads. The national average is \$19,615. The bill for that negligence is coming due, eventually, critics say, and that eventuality is coming closer with each passing day.

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