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Roads

DOT remains unaccountable despite 'reform'

By Hannah Hill

Last week, the South Carolina Senate passed a bill that would lay the groundwork allowing the governor to appoint the state superintendent of education, making the Department of Education a cabinet agency and fully accountable to the governor. The bill has yet to pass the House, but a similar bill passed the House last session.

The idea behind the legislation is sound. Apart from the governor and lieutenant governor, South Carolina has no fewer than seven constitutional officers, public officials elected by the entire state. Our system creates, in effect, a series of "little governors" in charge of their own fiefdoms. The commissioner of agriculture, for example, is separately elected by the state, as if the average voter has any set idea of what the state's agriculture policy should be. The same is true of the adjutant general, as if the average voter has more than a clue of what that office even does.

The effect of this fragmented system is to shield these fiefdoms from any real accountability to voters and taxpayers. Their proper place is under the

governor, whose identity voters know and whose approach to governing they're familiar with. Hence the long-running effort, beginning with Gov. Mark Sanford in the early 2000s, to place many of these constitutional officers under the governor.

There's one area, however, where the fiefdom is completely insulated from voters: our road system. At least in education, the state superintendent is accountable to voters. At the Department of Transportation, accountability is so confused as to be non-existent.

DOT policy is set by an unelected commission that, until recently, was appointed by lawmakers. Under a bill passed into law last year, commissioners are technically "appointed" by the governor, thus supposedly putting the governor "in charge" of roads. The catch? The eight commissioners must be approved, first, by the congressional delegations from whose district they're chosen; second, by the legislature's Joint Transportation Review Committee; and third, by the Senate. The DOT secretary, formerly appointed by the governor, will now be appointed

by the commission.

That's three levels of legislative approval. It's a confusing mess, and deliberately so.

Under the new law, then, the powerful DOT commission, though technically appointed by the governor, will consist exclusively of people pre-selected by legislative leaders. And, as if to make gubernatorial power completely insignificant, the new law forbids the governor from firing DOT commissioners at will.

This near total absence of accountability to taxpayers is precisely the reason South Carolina's roads are deteriorating. But while many lawmakers happily acknowledge the need for clearer lines of accountability in public education, they studiously resist accountability on the equally important issue of roads and road maintenance.

It's not clear why, but a negative interpretation might suggest that influencing the placement and repair of state roads can yield substantial political benefits for politicians who know how to work the system. And indeed it's no accident that transportation dollars often end up, not in counties that need them

most, but in a few counties represented by legislative leaders.

That's a problem that no amount of new revenue can solve. In fact, raising the gas tax for the purpose of improving South Carolina's road system will only get us the same results, but at a higher price to the taxpayer.

There is a solution, however, and it's got nothing to do with new revenue. It's this: Make the governor fully and directly accountable for the state's road system. Unlike lawmakers, the governor is elected by the entire state, and our road system is a statewide concern, not a merely local one. So if residents in Pelion or Greenwood or Ridgeway want to hold someone accountable for the sorry state of their roads, they can call the governor's office and demand answers.

That wouldn't solve our road problems overnight, but direct accountability to taxpayers has a funny way of ensuring problems get dealt with and fast.

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