SC0032

News & Reporter
Publication Date: 03/29/2017 Page Number: a4

Title: Why a tax hike for roads won't fix your roads
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Size: 46.5 column inches
Chester, SC Circulation: 6700

OUR VIEW

Why a tax hike for roads won't fix your roads

By HANNAH HILL

We're hearing a lot of scary claims from the Department of Transportation and from legislative leaders: we have the highest rate of road fatalities in the nation, it will take billions to climb out of the hole our infrastructure system is stuck in, we have to pass some pretty significant tax hikes in order to truly address problems, and so on.

What are they not telling us? A lot, actually.

For instance, only last year the General Assembly passed a $2 billion bond bill specifically to raise revenue for infrastructure. Surely that money went to fix repaving roads, right? Wrong. Three-fourths of the revenue raised by that bill was slated by the DOT during last year's debates for interstate widening.

But it gets worse. That bill didn't actually spend $2 billion. Instead, it took an existing revenue stream ($200 million) and sent it to the unaccountable State Transportation Infrastructure Bank for bonding purposes. So instead of fixing potholes and repaving roads, lawmakers authorized a huge amount of new debt through the legislatively-controlled Infrastructure Bank. Was paving mentioned at all in that plan? Only as an afterthought.

Let's put this in perspective. If this year's House road funding plan passes, DOT plans to spend roughly $300 million of the new revenue on paving. That amount would (according to information from DOT) make a huge difference in the condition of our roads. So if fixing the roads were the primary concern, why didn't lawmakers last year simply send that annual $200 million to DOT for paving rather than to the Infrastructure Bank for debt-funded interstate widening? That would have actually funded road repair and maintenance, no tax increase required.

This is a recurring theme. Of the infrastructure revenue increases passed since 2013, the majority of funds have been directed to capital projects rather than maintenance. This is not a funding problem, and it is not the DOT's fault. As Secretary Hall correctly pointed out in a Senate subcommittee meeting, much of this legislation does not give DOT flexibility in spending these funds. Those priorities come straight from the General Assembly.

Even if lawmakers refrain from dictating spending decisions in the legislation itself, Secretary Hall still does not have flexibility to prioritize road spending or even to follow plans proposed to the legislature. The DOT commission has final say on where and when road money is spent. Who controls the commission? Legislative leaders.

Perhaps that is why DOT's current plans dedicate only half of any new road funding to fixing potholes. If this is a matter of life and death as lawmakers are insisting, why not place a freeze on everything but maintenance and spend all the money on making the pavements safe?

And the cherry on top? In a new bond bill the House Ways and Means Committee is rolling out, the DOT is asking for over $43 million – not to fix roads, but to renovate rest areas. Priorities.

All of these things point to one conclusion: the road money we currently have is being misappropriated by lawmakers whose priorities are not fixing the roads. The current infrastructure system is deliberately insulated from taxpayer influence and controlled by legislators who are unwilling to give up power. And what is their solution for crumbling roads? Taking more of their constituents' money to perpetuate the current system.

If South Carolina's lawmakers think our roads need improvement, they should first ask why the existing system isn't working and isn't accountable to citizens. Only when they make it accountable should they even talk about taking more money from taxpayers.

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