



BEFORE | Paved Surface



AFTER | Gravel Surface

Going 'Back to the Stone Age' in Chambers County

The road was so bad – and any possibility of resurfacing so far in the future – that residents along Chambers County Road 139 thanked Chairman Joe Blanks for tearing out the paved road and replacing it with gravel. This dilemma is not unique to Chambers County or even Alabama; jurisdictions across the country face similarly difficult choices.

Infrastructure struggles similar across states

ASCE Report Card: Alabama earned C- on bridges, D+ on roads

What's the old joke about there being good news and bad news and which do you want first?

Well, when the American Society of Civil Engineers started handing out “news” on the condition of Alabama’s infrastructure, the punch line wasn’t funny at all.

Alabama’s bridges notched a grade of C- on the group’s 2015 Report Card, and roads came in with a D+. Experts agree the deteriorated condition hurts the economy, wastes money and poses life-threatening safety risks.

As bad as the current status sounds, Alabama has a lot of company from other states. “This challenge exists in every state, and some states have been more active than others,” said economist Alison P. Black, Ph.D.

As chief economist for the American Road & Transportation Builders Association (ARTBA), she sees that most states are wrestling with the same factors – road usage is up, resources for road upkeep are down and the pressure to compete for economic development prospects is intense.

The Federal Highway Administration reports that Americans are driving more miles on rapidly deteriorating roads and bridges. Skyrocketing inflation has zapped the impact of existing revenue for road maintenance and improvements. In a lukewarm economy, people want good infrastructure to give their communities a competitive edge in recruiting new jobs.

In the face of these overwhelming needs, states both red and blue are taking the lead on solving the problem. Some 16 states have

increased gas taxes in just the last 3 years, a significant acceleration, according to the trade group ARTBA.

In many places, voters have had the ultimate say on road funding, approving over 72 percent of ballot initiatives for transportation funding in the last decade, according to ARTBA. There is a “very high approval rating” when people see this as an investment in their communities that will return benefits for years to come, Black said.

This “can-do” attitude in individual states is partly rooted in a realization that the federal government is not likely to save the day anytime soon. The recently enacted Fixing America’s Surface Transportation (FAST) Act included welcome “modest increases,” she said. But after years of temporary fixes and crisis after crisis, its passage does not signal that the political will exists to provide help in proportion to the needs, she added.

Many times, the states that are pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps are counting on a double benefit from the investment: first, the immediate economic boost of the work itself, and then long-term gains from improved infrastructure’s value to the business community.

“It’s going to have a ripple effect on the economy for years,” the economist said.

Just for starters, the Federal Highway Administration estimates that each dollar spent on road, highway and bridge improvements results in an average benefit of \$5.20 in the form of reduced vehicle maintenance costs, reduced delays, reduced fuel consumption, improved safety and reduced road and bridge maintenance costs.



States that are making progress on their transportation infrastructure have a variety of funding mechanisms to choose from, but fuel taxes – the traditional workhorse for funding these services – still dominate, ARTBA finds.

Fairness is a big part of the appeal. Fuel taxes are a user fee, and that means they are only paid by

people who use the service. If you drive more – putting more wear and tear on the roads – you pay more. Drive less? You pay less.

“Increasing user fees to pay for a service is viewed as a conservative choice,” said Carolyn Kramer, manager of the Transportation Investment Advocacy Center.

Flat taxes such as Alabama’s are the most common. Some jurisdictions have turned to a general sales tax to help their roads. Other popular strategies are “undiverting” existing revenue, increasing vehicle excise taxes or bringing alternative fuels and electric vehicles into the tax base.

Tying levies to vehicle miles traveled (instead of gallons of gas) has an appeal, but so far is proving burdensome to implement.

Regardless of the specific approach, nearly half of all state legislatures are considering measures to increase transportation investment this year, ARTBA reports.

Alabama’s neighboring states are taking steps to improve their road and bridge infrastructure. Georgia has already increased investment, and there are active efforts underway in Tennessee and South Carolina.

“The southeast, like much of the U.S., is trying to push hard to move ahead,” Kramer concluded. ■

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