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Highways great progress may end in not-to-distant future

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When the Tri-State Summit first met in 1996, one task force pushed for better area highways. Summit Transportation task force members identified 1,519 miles in the three states of priority projects. This included Highway 61 between LaGrange and the Iowa border, as well as a number of area highways.

It was reported at the summit last week, 1,459 of those miles had been finished, were under construction or pending construction.

Of the 650 Iowa miles, 1010 are remaining priorities, including 56 miles of U.S. 61; nine miles of 218 and 36 of U.S. 63.

There are 145 Illinois miles remaining, of the original 298. This includes 24 miles on U.S. 34; six on U.S. 36/I-72; and 115 on Illinois 336/I-172 from the I-72 junction to U.S. 67 north of Macomb.

There are 64 remaining Missouri priority miles, of the 511 miles. This includes 10 miles of the Avenue of the Saints in Lewis and Clark Counties; eight miles on U.S. 61 and 46 miles on U.S. 63.

It was reported unfunded priority four-lane roads in the region have dropped 36 percent, or 178 fewer miles needing this.

While there is much progress, there is a down side to the transportation news too.

Missouri construction projects will drop rapidly with repaying the bonds used to accelerate the project. New funding sources for future highway projects haven't yet been identified.

"This is a vexing problem," Lt. Governor Peter Kinder told media before the summit began.

"We have entered into, from the 1990's on, bonding that has allowed the largest spurt of orange barrels across our state that we've ever had. Hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars of highway construction.

"We're running out of the bonding capacity, the capacity to service that, beginning in 2010.

"Our state is in the early stages of necessary discussion and debate, of how we're going to step up to the transportation funding challenges we face.

"Neither the administration, nor the constitutionally-independent MoDOT commission has laid out a detailed plan right now. Proposals are out there."

One proposal Kinder mentioned is for a .01 sales tax to upgrade interstates 70 and 40, and proposes to add two more lanes for truck traffic. It would be a 10-year sunset tax.

Missouri Highway Director Pete Rahn said the problems will require "innovative thinking, and innovative funding," such as projects on Route 36 in Missouri and 63 in Kirksville.

"It does not just happen without effort," Rahn said.

Rahn compared the highway mentality to the mentality of continuing to drive a 35-year old car.

“You buy and use it and buy another, and it costs more.”

He challenged the state and nation to invest in the interstate system, originally drawn up in 1937.

“Without significant federal investment, MoDOT will not be able to carry the cost.”

Rahn’s counterparts, Milton Sees, in Illinois, and Nancy Richardson of Iowa agreed the funding for all desired projects in their states is not present.

Sees said a group like the tri-state summit that comes to his department with a request, and agrees on the scope of the project is a good thing.

“The first question we ask, is ‘do you have a consensus?’

“Road and bridge money should be the building blocks for the economy. I’m not into building monuments, which is what you have, without economic development,” Sees said.

Richardson said a funding investment is before Illinois lawmakers, but said all states have a funding quandary.

“They need an endless supply of funding.”

She said 75 percent of Illinois transportation funds are into protecting the existing infrastructure.