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Striving to become simply the best...

DOT Commissioner Talks Brighter Transportation Landscape

AUGUSTA—Georgia Department of Transportation Commissioner Russell McMurry engaged the Augusta Exchange Club Thursday, May 28 about the current challenges facing transportation infrastructure and how the 2015 Transportation Funding Act (House Bill 170) will produce positive, visible results. Georgia features the 10th largest transportation network, while also being the 8th most populous state nationally. HB 170 passed the most recent state legislative session thanks to the hard work of numerous elected officials that recognized a need to catch up to continued growth.

“Every day there are 300 million vehicle miles traveled across this state,” McMurry said. “Until recently, Georgia has ranked 49th in per capita spending on transportation. That’s not something to be proud of. But that’s changing now based on recent legislation.”

State Funding Means Faster, Cost Effective Delivery

The United States Congress has yet to fully fund the federal transportation program. A recent two-month extension of the Highway Trust Fund was announced a few weeks ago. The extension means funding for transportation projects will continue to be available until July 31.

McMurry said it’s difficult to run a business on a month-to-month basis and still meet the public’s expectation.

“So bear with us. It’s hard when (the Georgia DOT) is trying to deliver transportation projects, when at this moment, we aren’t sure what August holds,” McMurry said. “Attempting to run a billion dollar program two months at a time is a challenge. But we will make the best of it.”

The nearly \$1 billion HB 170 is projected to generate for transportation places Georgia ahead of the game. The boosted state funding allows the Department the ability to move federal funding to less complex projects. Projects will be delivered faster and stretch every dollar further. Recent studies from the Florida DOT show that the National Environmental Policy Act process doubles the time and cost of the preliminary engineering phase. Also, construction costs tend to be less when not using the federal route.

“Through the Governor’s leadership and the leadership of our House and Senate Transportation Committees, they worked very hard to come up with a solution that frees us a little bit from the federal handcuffs that we’ve been given,” McMurry said. “Beginning on July 1, as revenues begin to come in, we can really make a difference in transportation for this state. There are unique things that I think the nation can learn from what Georgia did. Coming in as a new commissioner, I have to say that things are looking good.”

The Transportation Funding Act converts the state gas tax to an excise tax rate of 26 cents per gallon on gasoline and 29 cents per gallon on diesel. This rate will be annually indexed for increased vehicle fuel

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efficiency and from 2016 to 2018 for Consumer Price Index increases. Other Transportation Funding Act provisions include: a heavy vehicle annual impact fee of \$50 or \$100 based on vehicle weight; a \$5 per night hotel/motel lodging fee; a \$200 noncommercial and \$300 commercial alternative fuel vehicle annual registration fee, while also eliminating tax credits on low or zero emission vehicles.

“All this is a hybrid model to bring more funding to transportation,” McMurry said. “It was hard for our Legislature this year. Some were for (HB 170). Some were against it, but it got done. Now, we have to deliver (on transportation) and bring this state further than it’s ever been.”

Critical Needs Right Now

Georgia has nearly 15,000 bridges with an average age of 44 years old. The Georgia DOT’s optimal replacement schedule of 200 bridges each year has been unattainable, as recent funding challenges have permitted just 60 bridge rehabs annually, McMurry said last week.

Typically interstate and state route bridges are in good shape, but some 1,500 local route bridges are posted with strict load restrictions.

“You may look at a low volume road, and say well that’s not as important, but if a farmer can’t get his crops off the field and across the road, that has a negative impact on the economy and commerce,” McMurry said. “Even those small bridges are very critical and have to be in good shape.”

An expected \$900 million in annual revenues will provide the ability to take care of our critical infrastructure. In coming fiscal years, the Georgia DOT can tackle routine maintenance, such as patching potholes, bridge joint repairs, reconstruction and rehabilitation to bridge structures. McMurry said citizens can expect more frequent grass mowing, litter pick-up, road resurfacing and Local Maintenance and Improvement Grant funds for local governments when the Transportation Funding Act revenues enter the Department’s coffers.

“(Roadside appearance) has been the No. 1 thing on public opinion polls,” the Commissioner said. “We are going to use our first dollars of HB 170 to come in and do those things. It’s important that the citizens see and know a difference.”

The Georgia Legislature also earmarked \$100 million worth of bonds specifically for critical bridges. Georgia DOT can advance almost 25 statewide bridge projects immediately thanks to that bond jolt.

McMurry also said “reestablishing by rehabilitating” the state’s road pavements is another short-term focus of the Department. Based on the increased roadway fatality rates to begin 2015, safety remains the No. 1 concern. Safety treatments include fresh striping, new reflectors and replacing old signage that keeps drivers alert and aware.

All aforementioned priorities and Georgia DOT goals center on becoming “Simply the Best.”

“I want all other 49 states to say, ‘What are you doing Georgia? How are you doing this?’ and I can tell you right now most (other states) are keenly interested in the legislation that just passed,” McMurry said. “This is the ultimate, sustainable fix.”

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DriveAlert ArriveAlive calls attention to an alarming increase in roadway fatalities across Georgia, many resulting from preventable crashes and distracted driving. *DriveAlert ArriveAlive* implores motorists to buckle up; stay off the phone and no texting; and drive alert. Visit www.dot.ga.gov/DS/SafetyOperation/DAAA. #ArriveAliveGA

For more information about Georgia DOT, visit www.dot.ga.gov. You may follow us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/GDOTEast) and Twitter (<http://twitter.com/GDOTEastTraffic>).

Attached photo: Georgia Department of Transportation Commissioner Russell McMurry speaks about the current state of transportation to the Augusta Exchange Club Thursday, May 28.

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