



STATE OF MISSISSIPPI
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND COMMERCE
ANDY GIPSON
COMMISSIONER

Opinion Column

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From Farm to Table, Transportation Infrastructure Requires Dedicated Funding

By: Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce Andy Gipson

Fresh farm-raised food from the garden usually follows a simple and inexpensive path, and often the farmer is also the cook and the consumer. On the larger and more common commercial scale, farm-to-table food is a bit more complicated: traveling over local roads, state highways, and federal interstates; multiplied tons of poultry, soybeans, livestock and corn requiring reliable bridges and safe roadways. From the farm to a processor or packager, to a wholesaler, to your grocery store (or a grocery store across the world), Mississippi's agricultural industry – food, fiber, fuel – requires reliable transportation infrastructure. Our State must invest in our own transportation infrastructure, and I believe we can do it without additional taxes.

For many years, budget restrictions had forced the Mississippi Department of Transportation (MDOT) to focus on routine maintenance and paving and forego new projects. But fortunately, thanks to one-time funding from the Mississippi Legislature and Federal Aid Highway Program funds, MDOT has restarted its "Capacity Program" including major new construction projects in 2021.

Mississippi needs to keep that transportation momentum. Currently, much of the state funded portion of the MDOT budget comes from a fuel tax diversion. When we fill up at the gas station, for every gallon of gas we purchase at the pump we pay 18 cents, the vast majority of which is diverted by the state to MDOT. Rather than increasing taxes on gasoline at the pump, in a recent column Transportation Commission Chairman Willie Simmons and MDOT Executive Director Brad White shared another solution I read with great interest as Ag Commissioner.

They urge a more diversified funding approach with the Legislature combining "unobligated portions of revenue streams such as the use tax and gaming revenue" with the current fuel tax to provide for the maintenance and future development of our transportation system. This approach would actually fill the gap in funding without raising anyone's taxes.

Assigning these taxes already being collected toward MDOT (rather than creating new taxes or raising current taxes) provides a predictable, consistent, and diverse funding stream which allows for long term planning and enhances the state's ability to maximize federal highway funds. Importantly, it doesn't increase the cost burden on Mississippians at the pump. In a largely rural state like Mississippi in which long mileage daily commutes are common, fuel costs significantly impact our workers, farmers, and families. And when it comes to moving the agricultural commodities that fuel our economy, good roads and safe bridges don't help if you can't afford to fill the gas tank of the transport truck.

I support this idea of assigning existing revenue to MDOT's budget to fund new construction and perform maintenance in a way that does not raise taxes. I encourage the Legislature to find permanent dedicated streams of revenue as requested by the Mississippi Department of Transportation.

Safe and reliable transportation infrastructure is required for Mississippi's agriculture and commerce. Enhancing our infrastructure takes time and money so we can continue to be competitive in our country and in the global economy. Part of planning for the future is planning for future budgets, and I believe Willie Simmons and Brad White are on target with their recommendation that avoids tax increases.

Agriculture, our State's largest industry, depends on roadways and bridges to move products from the field for shipment to market – from the farm gate to our dinner plate. Transportation delays can cost farmers and agribusinesses time and money. Responsible decisions that don't raise taxes will help keep our Mississippi food supply abundant and affordable.

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