

GROW KANSAS: Engineers make a difference

BY RICK WORREL

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Safe, efficient, well-maintained highways and roads have been a hallmark of Kansas' commitment to the statewide economy for decades. Kansans owe this huge asset to long-term vision; responsible funding and investment; outstanding engineering and construction; and prudent maintenance. Taking care of a \$2-trillion-plus statewide asset makes perfect sense. Recent state budget realities, however, could take a toll on our progress.

From ancient civilizations to current times, engineers' contributions have helped meet transportation needs. Beyond providing technical skills, engineers have a responsibility to the public for safe, reliable infrastructure that supports commerce, education, healthcare, families, and the community overall. They make a difference.

Leveraging engineering skills that turn a vision into highways, bridges, and other infrastructure requires adequate funding over the long haul. In 1989, obvious decay from inadequate investment prompted legislative support for the Comprehensive Highway Program (CHP), Kansas' first 10-year program. In 2010, the governor signed into law the Transportation Works for Kansas (TWORKS) program, the state's third 10-year transportation funding program. TWORKS allocated \$8 billion for wide-ranging improvements, emphasizing pavement preservation (roadway maintenance) and modernization or expansion of the statewide system.

Although TWORKS did not specify proj-



ects, it promised each county at least \$8 million. To date, 75 counties have already benefited from TWORKS investments, improving public safety and generating economic growth across the state.

The challenge facing the Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT) is that the \$8-billion TWORKS commitment is only 60 percent of the previous program. Policymakers agreed it was the right level in the midst of near-recessionary conditions. Even so, the state and local transportation needs that had been identified exceeded the available funding.

Adding to this initial challenge, more than \$1 billion has been transferred from the state's highway fund to the state's general fund since 2010. Declining revenues in FY2015 plus forecasted declines in FY2016 and FY2017 suggest that TWORKS funding could face further cuts. Taking more from an underfunded program merely pushes our problems farther into the future, at a higher cost.

Kansas consistently earns high marks for its transportation system (number 5 in the

Reason Foundation's 21st Annual Highway Report). This status reflects the state's investment since 1989. Before that first 10-year plan, there had been no substantial investment, pavement and bridge conditions were poor, accident rates were high, and limited modernization had occurred to spur economic growth. The clear lesson here: Kansas needs to continually invest to maintain transportation system quality; to relieve congestion and safely move people, goods, and materials throughout the state; and to GROW KANSAS (create jobs and spur economic growth).

Continuous investment is far less expensive to Kansas' taxpayers than replacing failing systems. Stable funding is one of the most important factors to the success of past programs.

When business leaders decide where to locate their operations, transportation and logistics are among the top factors that influence decisions about location. As the Kansas Freight Advisory Committee puts it, when you move freight, you move the economy. The committee is a partnership between KDOT and the Kansas Turnpike Authority (KTA).

"Well-maintained transportation infrastructure is a competitive advantage for Kansas and our cities," said Tracey Osborne, president, Overland Park Chamber of Commerce. "Businesses demand locations that provide safe commutes for their workforces and efficient transport of their goods. Our investments in our transportation infrastructure optimize our central location, leading the private sector to invest in job creation."

Paying for design and construction to build

new roads, improve existing facilities, and implement features that improve safety is only part of the picture. It will take money, not simply a vision and great engineering, to hold on to this high-value competitive advantage.

Of course engineering firms favor investing in the transportation system – such funding translates to hiring engineers and increasing income. The greater risk in failing to fund the \$8-billion program would impact Kansans across the board. For example, it would:

- Eliminate public investments focused on improving safety, attracting new business, enhancing travel efficiency, moving farm and business products, reducing car repairs, and supporting job development.
- Jeopardize ready access to routine and emergency medical care.
- Curtail investments that have measurably improved safety and the Kansas economy, such as the I-435 and US-69 corridors improvements in Johnson County.

One of Kansas' many strengths – and a vital cog to economic growth – is our high-quality transportation system. At its core, TWORKS is about preserving past investment, improving safety, creating jobs, and GROWING KANSAS. It is essential that the 4/10-cent sales tax (the key funding mechanism of TWORKS) stays in place and that TWORKS is completed as envisioned in 2010. Indeed, with committed public investment, engineers will make a difference that ensures a vibrant, safe Kansas.

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