



## **More than 120 Attend 2010 Transportation Conference Leaders Urge \$100+ Million for Road Maintenance**

More than 120 people from across West Virginia attended the 2010 Transportation Conference hosted by West Virginians for Better Transportation. The conference, which was the second annual, was held September 8 at Stonewall Resort in Roanoke, W.Va. The meeting was held in conjunction with the 2010 Annual Convention of the West Virginia Trucking Association.

The day-long conference provided attendees with updates on the state's transportation plans as well as information regarding the outlook for state and federal funding. State DOT Secretary Paul Mattox started off the conference by reviewing ongoing construction projects across the state and outlined where the state will be focusing its "limited" funds in the coming years.



He noted that state roads are "woefully underfunded" and "we must search for new revenues for the state Road Fund," which is facing constraints due to ever increasing construction costs and stagnant growth in revenue collections. Secretary Mattox said one option being explored that could generate more transportation funds is to increase the state's motor vehicle tax, which would raise \$117 million to help maintain county roads. This added \$117 million a year would provide the DOH with double the amount of funds it currently has for road maintenance.

State Senator Walt Helmick, who chairs the powerful W.Va Senate Finance Committee, agreed with Mattox that the state needs more funds for roads, bridges and highways. Senator Helmick said the Legislature is planning to undertake a study of transportation funding, and he thinks the state should an additional \$150 million so it could be dedicated for road maintenance. He said, however, that lawmakers will need to be "innovative" in how these extra funds are found. Helmick warned that the state's debt and long-term liability situation, which is approaching \$15 billion, is competing for available state dollars.

Tom Smith, who is the W.Va. Division Administrator for the Federal Highway Administration, provided added highlights of President Obama's recently announced \$50 billion second stimulus plan, which would be used for highway, airport and rail construction projects and establish a permanent infrastructure bank. The President's plan would go to pay for the rebuilding of 150,000 miles of roads and bridges across the nation. This \$50 billion plan is nearly double what was provided for transportation infrastructure in the first stimulus bill. While this second "stimulus" funding will be helpful if it is passed by Congress, Smith said the long-term solution for federal highway funding is for Congress to enact another 6-year reauthorization of the federal highway funding bill. The current highway bill (SAFETEA-LU) expired back in September 2009. Passage of a reauthorization bill is problematic at this time, particularly given the political situation and the lack of consensus on a funding mechanism to help pay for the higher price tag that is contemplated for construction projects over the next several years. Smith noted that the first stimulus bill provided West Virginia with \$211 million in added federal funds, which is providing dollars for 147 projects across the Mountain State. Most of these are either complete or well underway, he added.

Second District Congresswoman Shelley Moore Capito echoed Smith's sentiments about the challenges in Congress regarding federal highway fund. She said "everything is on hold...pending the upcoming election." Capito said she strongly supports congressional passage of a federal highway reauthorization bill, which "should have been done by now." She noted that the challenge is coming up with a way to pay for the costs. She said many members of Congress realize that federal funding needs to be increased, and among the possible options may be to hike the federal gasoline tax or establish some type of new tax, such as a mileage-based or GPS-based tax. All of these, though, face different areas of opposition.



Congresswoman Capito said the days of using earmarks to help funnel federal funds to specific transportation projects may be over. Capito, along with the help of Senator Rockefeller and former Senator Byrd, obtained earmarks to get added funds for state transportation projects, particularly for highway improvement work for Route 35 in Putnam County. She noted that political environment in Washington is against earmarks.

The group also heard a taped video presentation from Senator Jay Rockefeller, who expressed his strong support for transportation funding and stated that he will be working to get Congress to focus on a new federal highway bill.

An afternoon panel discussion provided perspectives on the importance of transportation to the trucking industry and the state's travel industry. The viability of both industries is highly dependent on continued maintenance and expansion of roads, bridges and highways. Both industries have experienced tremendous growth over the past several decades thanks to the expansion of our nation's – and state's – highway infrastructure. But this growth may be challenged if transportation needs are not met or if funding is allowed to remain stagnant.

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