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GOVERNOR CALLS SPECIAL SESSION: On Aug. 10, Gov. Matt Blunt, Senate President Pro Tem Michael R. Gibbons and House Speaker Rod Jetton announced a special session of the Missouri General Assembly to begin Aug. 20 to fast track the Safe and Sound Bridge Improvement Program to repair or replace more than 800 Missouri bridges and enact an economic development package which includes an expansion of the Governor's successful Quality Jobs Act.

"We have been working with transportation officials since last year to make Missouri bridges safer and sounder and the tragedy in Minnesota certainly illustrates the importance of our work," Gov. Blunt said. "Now we need to clear this final hurdle in a special session to implement the Safe and Sound Bridge Improvement Program to make Missouri's transportation infrastructure even stronger. Missourians have responded to the pro-jobs, pro-growth initiatives we have enacted by creating nearly 90,000 jobs since Jan. 2005. The Quality Jobs Act is the most important economic development tool we have had to help create family-supporting jobs with good wages and health care benefits. I am asking the legislature to expand the Quality Jobs Act and other pro-jobs, pro-growth initiatives with a responsible economic development bill."

Senate President Pro Tem Michael R. Gibbons said the Senate would work efficiently to pass the Governor's calls to improve the lives of Missourians. "The Quality Jobs Act has been extremely successful in providing more than 12,000 good-paying jobs with benefits to Missourians. This special session will allow us to expand the program's cap to allow businesses to hire more Missourians," Sen. Gibbons said. "I am also glad to see we will have an opportunity to move forward with the design and build project of more than 800 bridges that has been in the works since last fall. This step will generate much needed repairs and construction making Missouri's bridges safer for our drivers."

"I appreciate Gov. Blunt's leadership in working with the legislature to reach an agreement that has brought us to a point where we can proceed with making Missouri a better place to live, work, and raise a family," Speaker Jetton said. "A great deal of credit should be given to Sen. Griesheimer and Rep. Richard for their work on reaching a compromise for HB 327. They reached out and brought members from both legislative chambers and parties together to come to a consensus that everyone has agreed to."

Gov. Blunt is asking the legislature to address the need to improve and replace hundreds of Missouri bridges with a legislative change to allow contractors to access the bonds needed for the projects. The bonds for the Safe and Sound Bridge Improvement Program will help protect the taxpayer by ensuring the work is completed by the contractors who fix and replace the

bridges. Without this change, no contractors would be able to obtain the required bonds, which would prevent the program from moving forward.

Lawmakers are also expected to address the need for an economic development package that includes an expansion of the Quality Jobs Act. The package would allow the Quality Jobs initiative to create even more family-supporting jobs by increasing its capacity from \$12 million to \$40 million. The package would also increase the Enhanced Enterprise program.

MoDOT's Director, Pete Rahn praises the Governor for this special session because bridge improvements are clearly a critical need for Missouri, and MoDOT is ready to get started on this ambitious 800-bridge program as soon as possible.

The Safe & Sound program will repair or replace 800 of the state's most worn-out bridges by 2012. In addition to bringing all those bridges up to good condition, the contract will require them to be maintained in good condition for at least an additional 25 years. If the needed legislative change is approved, MoDOT anticipates work will begin in the spring.

[Much of this information for this article was derived from Governor Blunt's press release issued Aug. 10, 2007].

JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION OVERSIGHT LISTENS TO TRANSPORTATION FUNDING CONCERNS: On July 31, just a little over 300 people attended a joint meeting involving MoDOT and the Joint Committee on Transportation Oversight to discuss the future of transportation funding. This was the largest crowd to ever attend a hearing before this committee. The purpose of the hearing was to hear expert testimony with regard to the future of transportation funding in the United States and what options are available to the states to address a funding crisis.

The hearing kicked off with video presentations from Gov. Matt Blunt and Sen. Kit Bond. Gov. Blunt applauded MoDOT for the work they have done over the past years, reiterated his full support of MoDOT's "Better Roads Brighter Future" Program and stressed that building and maintaining transportation infrastructure is vital to the states economy. Sen. Bond testified there would be limited spending by the Federal Government and what is done in Missouri may be more important than anything that can be done on the federal level.

Director Pete Rahn was first to testify before the committee. Rahn described to the joint committee the situation Missouri is in that makes for a "perfect storm" with regard to transportation funding. Rahn advised the committee that Missouri's Transportation Department has worked to address the funding crisis by lowering administrative costs to where Missouri has the third lowest administrative costs in the country and by initiating a "practical design" concept. However, the current funding levels even with these cost saving components, will drop off the cliff in 2010 if something is not done to address the transportation-funding crisis that faces the state. In 2008, Missouri will have a \$1.23 billion construction program compared to a \$569 million construction program in 2010.

The funding crisis is inevitable because Missouri's transportation funding source is stagnant and construction costs continue to rise. A potential loss of federal revenue in the amount of \$350 - \$400 million is anticipated in 2010.

Also testifying at the hearing was David Horner, United States Department of Transportation. Horner's message was to look not only at increasing transportation revenues but to look at what resources are the best to address the funding crisis. Horner also reported that the federal government looks at earmarking as wasteful because it reduces flexibility in spending. Horner recommended states review the use of public private partnerships and toll roads.

Others testifying were Kenneth Simonson, Chief Economist, Associated General Contractors of America; Jack Finn, National Director of Toll Services, HNTB; Robert Poole, Director of Transportation Studies, Reason Institute; William Buechner, Vice President, Economics and Research, American Road and Transportation Builders Association; Rep. Mike Krusee, Texas Legislator, Chairman, Texas House Transportation Committee; Earl Mahfuz, Georgia DOT Treasurer; and Ed DeSoigne, Executive Director, Heavy Constructors Association of Greater Kansas City.

The committee took no action.

INTEROPERABILITY NEEDS PRESENTED TO INTERIM COMMITTEE TO EVALUATE THE 911 SYSTEM: On Aug. 7 the Missouri State Highway Patrol made a presentation before a House 911 Interim Committee, which was formed to evaluate Missouri's 911 system. The committee is chaired by Rep. Mark Bruns (R-Jefferson City). Colonel Keathley and Officer Roger Strope of the Missouri State Highway Patrol testified before the committee on the need to improve interoperability communication.

Col. Keathley advised the committee that the highway patrol's communication system is over fifty years old and needs to be replaced with an advanced real-time communication system. The total estimated cost for a new system is estimated at \$300 million. During the 2007 session, the cost for Phase 1 of the statewide interoperability system was included in HB 19 at an amount of \$7.2 million to be paid from the State Highways and Transportation Department Fund.

The patrol intends to move forward again this session with a better plan to find resources to fund the new system. The patrol, during their presentation indicated that the efforts needed to be shared by the "communication partners" and the funding would require a "combined commitment of resources."

The committee took no action.

STATE REPRESENTATIVE PLEADS GUILTY TO ILLEGAL DEALINGS: On Aug. 9, Rep. Nathan Cooper (R-Cape Girardeau) pleaded guilty to his role in a scheme to illegally get visas for workers.

The visa program, called H2B, allows companies who need seasonal workers, and can't find enough locally, to get temporary work visas so they can hire workers who are not U.S. citizens. Prosecutors say that Rep. Cooper took in \$50,000 in legal fees over a two-year period from clients in the trucking industry to obtain the illicit visas.

Cooper admitted creating shell companies to acquire the visas, which would be used for his trucking company clients. He also admitted he issued bogus letters to government agencies and illegally sold the visas to other companies.

Cooper, 33, pleaded guilty to one felony count of visa fraud and one felony count of making a false statement to the Department of Labor. The maximum sentence would be 15 years in prison and fines up to \$500,000.

Cooper will be sentenced in October.