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Surveying the road ahead

Taxpayers are eyeing early stages of TSPLOST; they'll want results

By **Augusta Chronicle Editorial Staff**

Sunday, Sept. 22, 2013

This is where the rubber meets the road.

Last year, voters in only three of Georgia's 12 regional transportation districts agreed to impose a 1-cent "TSPLOST" transportation tax on themselves – including the 13-county Augusta region.

As the vote indicates, the tax was a tough sell. It not only pitted the 12 regions against each other – whoever passed it might get a leg up on other regions in the state's economic development competition – but it also pitted counties within the districts against each other. Locally, some complained that Richmond County, which approved the tax, "pulled" other counties into the tax.

That's a bit spurious, since the rest of the state – through the legislature – could "pull" all 159 counties into a new tax too.

Yet, while this page endorsed the TSPLOST, we understood the angst about it. Still do. It's a new tax, an additional tax, at a time when "tax" is a four-letter word.

But the new TSPLOST gave regions of the state unprecedented autonomy in road construction: Each region came up with its own project proposals, each region voted whether to pass the tax, and each region's leaders will oversee its implementation.

For the Augusta region, that means \$841 million in TSPLOST funds – and a total of about \$1 billion in construction over 10 years, after adding in federal funds.

Richmond County TSPLOST projects include repairs to John C. Calhoun Expressway; improvements to the Gordon Highway and Deans Bridge Road intersection; resurfacing on various roads; major improvements to River Watch Parkway and Windsor Spring Road; and widening Wrightsboro Road from Bobby Jones Expressway to Jimmie Dyess Parkway.

Work on the latter is already well under way.

The need for infrastructure improvements is undeniable, particularly with two nearby ports, in Savannah and Charleston, being upgraded to handle increased traffic from the expanded Panama Canal. One supporter called the TSPLOST Georgia's "best economic development opportunity in the past 35 years."

State and local leaders also know that fuel taxes are becoming less of a reliable cash cow than they've been historically, and that new funding sources for infrastructure have to be found.

They also say that the TSPLOST is so innovative that other states are watching to see if it works.

But mostly, taxpayers are watching.

The Chronicle's editorial staff met last October with a group of officials from the Georgia Department of Transportation. We tried to impress upon them the importance of TSPLOST working, and working well. They all appeared to understand, and indicated that, although this is mostly a regional program, GDOT itself, too, has skin in the game and wants to preserve its reputation by making TSPLOST successful.

Everyone knew it would take months for TSPLOST funds, which began to be collected in January, to start adding up. But ominously, we learn that through July, collections were 18 percent below estimates.

"It's not the time to be concerned at this point," says GDOT Chief Engineer Russell McMurry, adding that we're in month nine of a 10-year tax.

Buds are starting to sprout on the TSPLOST tree. But the fruits need to be showing up quickly.

In short, the next year or two will set the tone.

Richmond County, Columbia County and others in this region will need to see some tangible benefits from the tax we agreed to levy on ourselves. We signed up for 84 projects – 50 in Richmond County, eight in Columbia County. The pressure will be on state and local leaders to deliver.

It won't help the TSPLOST image if drivers continue to see clogged, two-lane roads in rush hour. We need relief.

As we wrote last year, the future will go to those who can transport goods and people the most efficiently.

The future is now.

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