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Transportation needs remain high state priority

An influential special-interest group reminds us that St. Landry is not the only place with road problems. The group is hoping to convince lawmakers that Louisiana's transportation issues are still important, despite the whole crop of new financial problems.

Driving Louisiana Forward, a nonprofit advocacy group backed by construction and other business interests, has put forward its legislative agenda for the next session of the legislature.

Some of its programs were adopted in the last session, and DLF hopes to maintain its momentum with legislators.

"We made some good inroads last year in the campaign, thanks to the support of the governor and the Legislature, but there is still a lot of work to be done," according to Jennifer Marusak, communications director of DLF.

"Louisiana still faces a \$14 billion backlog in unmet construction needs, and our current road, bridge and port funding simply does not work. The Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development remains drastically underfunded."

Currently, the state's primary source of road, bridge and port money is a 16-cent gas tax, which was approved in 1984 and has never been adjusted to keep up with inflation. As such, the buying power of those 16 cents is less than 8 cents, according to Marusak.

Marusak says the legislative package DLF is pushing would generate about \$600 million annually - without increasing state taxes or fees.

Specific proposals include:

- Speeding up the recently-approved shift of vehicle sales taxes into the transportation fund, which is expected to bring in \$259 million over seven years.
- Eliminating another \$85 million in expenses from the fund by moving the transportation department's employee benefits into another area of the state's budget.
- Creating a Windfall Highway and Infrastructure Protection Fund using excess mineral revenue dollars, which could produce \$120 million per year.
- Using one-time appropriations from the state surplus to pay for one-time expenditures.

These may not be the specific avenues that need to be followed, and there is a growing resistance to dedicating money for any reason.

But we do agree with DLF that roads and bridges are getting worse everywhere we look, and that it will be better to fix them now than later.
