

# Strand: Our roads ahead of the curve

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A report released Wednesday slammed the nation's progress on road and bridge projects since 2005, but area transportation officials rebutted that finding locally and pointed to the sales tax plan and the RIDE program as reasons why.

The 2009 Report Card for America's Infrastructure, administered by the American Society of Civil Engineers, said roads have declined nationwide over the past four years. The society gave roads a grade of D in 2005 and dropped that to a D-minus this year - a grade local officials contend is not the case in Horry and Georgetown counties.

"As it relates to Horry County itself, I believe that we're in fairly good shape," said Steve Gosnell, Horry County's infrastructure director. "I think we're taking steps to address those key points [the society] has made."

The report card offers five solutions to raise the nation's infrastructure grade point average, which include: increasing federal leadership in infrastructure; promoting sustainability and resilience; addressing life-cycle costs and ongoing maintenance; developing federal, state and regional infrastructure plans; and increasing and improving infrastructure investment from all stakeholders. The last two - developing infrastructure plans and improving investments from stakeholders - are something the region has been working on for years now.

About three years ago, the Waccamaw Regional Council of Governments asked its 10 municipalities and DOT to come up with a list of problematic intersections in Horry and Georgetown counties. The groups listed 21 projects, 13 of which received funding for immediate attention.

The council also helped create the Grand Strand Area Transportation Study 2030 Long Range Transportation Plan, which details the area's transportation needs.

Mike Barbee, a project manager with the S.C. Department of Transportation who oversees area projects, said he would rate Horry County road projects at a B or B-minus.

"I think we're doing pretty good," he said, crediting the infrastructure and sales tax plans for being better off than other counties. "I'd say Horry County is well ahead of the curve on those two issues."

Barbee and Gosnell agree that secondary roads and some primary roads need work.

"As we continue to grow, there sure are capacity issues that we need to address along Bypass 17 and on 501," Gosnell said. "We certainly have needs. We're going to have significant needs over the next 2-3 years."

Barbee said, "We've got roads that I know need desperate attention. But, holistically, I think we're doing well."

Local officials have been lobbying for increased federal leadership in infrastructure, particularly the development of Interstate 73, under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act 2009. The act is an \$819 billion federal stimulus package for nationwide road projects that could be ready to build in 180 days.

Though the I-73 project has received plenty of regional and state support, Gov. Mark Sanford and U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-Seneca, still need some persuading that the project fits the purpose of the bill and that the project can be ready in that time frame.

Rep. Doug Jennings, D-Marlboro, and chairman of the I-73 committee, is scheduled to discuss the interstate project this morning in Columbia.

The engineers society's report also showed that there was "no significant improvement" in the nation's bridges, giving them a C average nationwide. One in four of the nation's bridges, the report said, remained "either structurally deficient or functionally obsolete."

In Sunset Beach, N.C., some have called the one-lane wooden pontoon bridge insufficient.

The more than 50-year-old structure was designed to last about 10 years, a family member of the man who built the bridge has said. It's been the subject of many debates and lawsuits and is on track to be replaced by late next year.

"Currently we have a bridge maintenance engineer and an operator designated for that bridge," said Jackson Provost, division construction engineer for the N.C. Department of Transportation. "It's a major, major operation."

He said the project is about 31 percent complete and despite the court battles and \$30 million pricetag, it will be well worth it.

"From a department standpoint, the long-term cost savings will eventually be recovered over the years," Provost said.