MDOT approves three new bridges for George County

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George County Supervisors were stunned into momentary silence at the end of their mid-month regular meeting last Tuesday morning. Just as the meeting was ready to close, County Communications Director Ken Flanagan received a text message relaying the results of the Mississippi Transportation Commission meeting and vote regarding the Emergency Road and Bridge Repair Fund (ERBRF) proposed projects.

He then told the George County Supervisors the Transportation Commission had just concluded their meeting in Jackson and approved spending $250 million on 163 road and bridge projects throughout the state.

Three of those projects are bridges in George County. Those projects are a new bridge on Salem Campground Road, a new bridge on Wilkerson Ferry Road and a new bridge at Merrill.

"The Transportation Commission unanimously approved the selected projects from a pool of 690 applications totaling nearly $1 billion," said Commissioner Mike Tagert, Northern Transportation District. "Although all applications contained important projects, those awarded will provide greatest benefit to the state's crippled infrastructure."

The approval of funds for the new bridges at Merrill was unexpected, although planned. Even as Dist. 4 Supervisor Larry Havard and the rest of the George County board worked to find funding for repairs to the old bridge, they were also authorizing engineering studies and preparing an application for a new bridge.

"You never know when funds are going to become available," Havard said, "and if you don't have your project on the shelf and ready to go, you are not going to get them."

Applications were received between November 14 and December 14 last year. Projects were chosen based on metrics that took into account bridge condition, project readiness, traffic volume, mobility and economic impact. Each application was analyzed and ranked based on these metrics and other criteria established through joint meetings with the ERBRF Advisory Board as well as survey information received from local governments, according to the MDOT press release.

"The Transportation Commission worked closely with MDOT and the advisory board to ensure the most effective statewide allocation of funds which improves public safety and strengthens Mississippi's economy," said Commissioner Tom King, Southern Transportation District. "The selected projects will replace closed and posted bridges, reopening many agricultural and commerce corridors as well as providing safe passage for emergency vehicles and school buses."

It took six years for the supervisors to find the money to repair the old bridge, and those repairs are still weeks away from completion. The repairs will allow the old bridge to be reopened to automobile and pickup traffic.

"We have to have the new bridge built within three years," Havard said. "We don't have any time to waste. It will take a while to build a bridge like that."

He said the old bridge being reopened will be important not only for local traffic for the next three years, but also for the contractor who builds the new bridge.

The existing Merrill Bridge has been designated as a historic site and must be preserved. Havard said the plans also along have been to make it a recreational area with a small park and keep it open to foot and bicycle traffic.

The existing road from the west side of the bridge to Hwy. 57 is still a dirt road. By the time the new bridge opens, that road will be paved, Havard said. "Those folks deserve it. They have put up with the dust and the mud for a long time."

"The Merrill Bridge has been a thorn in my side for 36 years," he said. "I always knew we would get a new bridge there. I want to thank Rep. Doug McLeod and Sen. Dennis DeBar for their help with this. I also want to thank my fellow supervisors for their support. If they had balked at any step along the way, this wouldn't have happened."

"We have been blessed here in George County to get these three new bridges."
The grassroots effort by local leaders to obtain funds for road and bridge repairs yielded positive results, with Wayne County receiving $1.2 million for a trio of projects that were included in a $250 million statewide effort to address crumbling highway infrastructure.

Wayne County Board of Supervisors President Jerry Hutto and Vice President Gaston Hutcherson were among local delegations of elected officials from across the Magnolia State taking part in the 2019 Mississippi Association of Supervisors' mid-winter legislative conference held Jan. 15-17.

"One of the biggest issues that we wanted to address with lawmakers was the need for road and bridge money making it to the counties and cities," said Hutto, who represents Beat 3. "We got a commitment from Sen. Dennis DeBar and Rep. Shane Barnett that they would do all they could to help us, and we greatly appreciate their efforts from the issuance of bonds by the issuance of bonds by District 86 State Rep. Shane Barnett and District 43 State Sen. Dennis DeBar, to discuss a wide range of topics, including state funding of local road and bridge repairs.

Wayne County Beat 3 Supervisor Jerry Hutto, second from left, and Beat 5 Supervisor Gaston Hutcherson, right, attended the 2019 Mississippi Association of Supervisors' Mid-Winter Legislative Conference in Jackson Jan. 15-17. Hutto, as board president, and Hutcherson, as board vice president, met with lawmakers, including District 86 State Rep. Shane Barnett and District 43 State Sen. Dennis DeBar, to discuss a wide range of topics, including state funding of local road and bridge repairs.
Barnett that they would do all they could to help us, and we greatly appreciate their efforts on our behalf. By working together, we have gotten a share of the dollars needed to begin addressing the concerns we've had in keeping our roads open and safe.”

One week after the conference, the Mississippi Transportation Commission unanimously green-lighted funds for 163 projects statewide under the Emergency Road and Bridge Repair Fund. This fund was created by the Mississippi Infrastructure Modernization Act, which was signed into law by Gov. Phil Bryant after the 2018 Special Legislative Session.

Wayne County saw three bridge projects funded – on the Buckatunna-Chicora-Clara Road for $550,947.71; on the Hiwannee-Chapparal Road for $368,736.06; and on the J.H. Mills Road for $321,404.16.

“We were pleased with the money that Wayne County received,” Hutto said. “Projects were submitted between mid-November and mid-December and were graded based on need and impact. Getting three projects approved as part of this round of state funding is the result of a lot of behind-the-scenes work to make this happen. We’re thankful to everyone that played a role in this.”

Hutcherson echoed Hutto’s sentiments, noting that the local projects were part of a pool of 691 requests for state funding for roads and bridges that totaled more than $1 billion dollars. “There was a lot of demand from all 82 counties,” he said. “While we didn’t get everything we wanted, this will be big step toward improving bridges across the county and the state. Sen. DeBar and Rep. Barnett were important in getting us to this point.”

Hutcherson said the announcement was one of the biggest to come from the state during his tenure as Beat 5 supervisor. “For years, all we’ve heard from the state each year was that money was tight and funds to the counties were being cut,” he continued. “This is money that will hopefully put us closer to where we need to be in addressing roads and bridges.”

The new funding comes from the issuance of bonds by state government, and came at a critical juncture, according to Southern District Transportation Commissioner Tom King.

“(Our goal) was to ensure the most effective statewide allocation of funds that improves public safety and strengthens Mississippi’s economy,” King said following last week’s awards announcements. “The projects will replace closed and posted bridges, reopening many agricultural and commerce corridors as well as providing safe passage for emergency vehicles and school buses.”

Following the Transportation Commission’s approval of projects, city and county governments across Mississippi received $213 million in funding while the Mississippi Department of Transportation was presented with $37 million for improvements on the state highway network.

Other locals attending the MAS conference included Chancery Clerk Geary Jackson and Board of Supervisors Attorney Cooper Beggett.

Topics addressed during the conference also included discussions on tax sales, lawsuits, reverse auctions and how counties are utilizing them, rural broadband initiatives and the upcoming 2020 Census.
MDOT continues the fight against human trafficking

The Mississippi Department of Transportation (MDOT) has joined various agencies across the state and country to recognize January as Human Trafficking Awareness Month.

The National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) reported 24 cases of some form of human trafficking in Mississippi in 2017 and an alarming 4,460 cases of human trafficking in the United States. Many victims of this crime are not in one place long enough to form social connections and are often transported throughout the country in commercial motor vehicles. MDOT’s Office of Enforcement plays a critical role in combating this issue and uncovering these victims.

“MDOT’s Office of Enforcement is combating this terrible crime year-round,” said Melinda McGrath, P.E., MDOT executive director. “MDOT’s officers are trained to know what to look for and how to help victims when found.”

The public can report information about a potential trafficking situation by calling the National Human Trafficking Hotline toll-free at 1-888-373-7888. Anti-Trafficking Hotline Advocates are available 24/7 to take reports of potential human trafficking. Anonymous tips can also be submitted online at www.humantraffickinghotline.org or by emailing help@humantraffickinghotline.org. Participate in the discussion on social media by using the hashtag #endtrafficking.