

EDITORIAL: Roads options must be explored

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William Ankner, Gov. Bobby Jindal's secretary of the Department of Transportation and Development, may have been a man of steely competence who had no taste for the good old boy nonsense in Baton Rouge. Or Ankner may have been tone-deaf to the subtleties in an area of state politics where funding difficulties run smack into competing regional interests.

It doesn't matter much now. Ankner resigned late Friday, a day after getting grilled at a legislative hearing over the award of a \$60 million contract to Boh Bros. Inc. for fixing a portion of Interstate 10 in Baton Rouge. Boh was the high bidder and estimated it would take longer to complete the work than the other bidders. But Ankner said the bid was better because it included the replacement of a bridge in the affected section. The legislators were having none of that. Ankner may be better off in any case. Louisiana's highway funding, and its system for distributing funding, is as inadequate as the transportation system itself. State government and the voters should implement changes in transportation funding that have already been proposed, and then take as much politics as possible out of the process by creating an independent commission to choose how the money gets spent.

How big is the problem? The DOTD estimates it has a \$14 billion backlog of important highway work and would need another \$650 million a year to deal with it. Four cents of the 20-cent gasoline tax is constitutionally dedicated to the TIMED program for big, important projects, but that tax isn't bringing in enough to pay for all the big, important work currently under contract.

On top of all that, we need another \$16 billion for so-called "mega-projects," including making I-49 run from Arkansas to New Orleans and building "loops" in Lafayette, Baton Rouge and Monroe. The most recent legislative fix, the 2008 dedication of vehicle sales tax income to highways, was supposed to raise about half the money needed to reduce the Transportation Trust Fund's work backlog, eventually. But a fail-safe provision kicked in when overall revenue fell.

The Public Affairs Research Council has proposed several changes to make funding adequate and more stable, including public-private partnerships to create toll roads, indexing the gasoline tax to inflation and a bigger tax for TIMED program work.

We should study all of them. And we should consider creation of an appointed commission, consisting of transportation professionals from around the state appointed for long terms, to decide how best to spend state highway funding. If a legislator can talk his colleagues into a general fund appropriation for a specific project, so be it. But the determination of transportation priorities and spending for them should be the work of professionals, not politicians.