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Jack Taylor, left, director of the Southwest Passage Initiative for Regional and Interstate Transportation, and Kansas Department of Transportation Secretary Mike King share a laugh Monday at a presentation at the Rock Island Depot.

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

The slow economic recovery has produced a few positive byproducts, including low inflation and a competitive construction market.

Kansas transportation has benefitted from both by saving dollars on the biggest, most expensive projects and by allowing the agency to do more system maintenance.

In 2010, the Kansas Legislature passed Transportation Works for Kansas (T-WORKS), a \$7.8 billion transportation program designed to generate jobs, improve safety and create economic development opportunities across the state.

For fiscal year 2013, the Kansas Department of Transportation has been funded \$1.6 billion, \$1 billion of which will be used for actual construction projects.



KDOT Secretary Mike King said for fiscal year 2014, the department will have a budget of \$1.3 billion, but this does not mean funding is being cut.

“It’s just the size of the project this year are substantially larger,” he said. “We have a 10-year program – 2010 to 2020. This is the biggest year.”

King was at Liberal’s Rock Island Depot Monday, and he said after some preliminary engineering and purchasing right of way, projects are now ready to be let out for bid under T-WORKS

“Next year’s will be less than the billion dollars, but there are many, many states that would love to have a billion dollar highway program,” he said. “Most don’t.”

Part of the remaining \$600 million from this year's budget will be used, King said, for maintenance of current stretches of road in Kansas.

"The highway programs before us invested a lot of money," he said. "We want to make sure we don't let that fail."

King compared what KDOT is doing with maintenance on state roads to the upkeep on a person's home.

"If you touch up your paint once in a while, you don't have to replace your siding all the time," he said. "You could let it all fail, and you could have this huge bill coming up down the road. It's the same way with highways. That's why we keep maintaining them."

KDOT Assistant Secretary Jerry Younger also spoke at Monday's presentation, and he said the state agency has some good projects currently in progress.

"It all goes back to really how we structured the T-WORKS program and really how we gather local input," he said.

Some of the projects from T-WORKS included more four laning on a stretch of U.S. Highway 54 east of Liberal and on U.S. Highway 50 west of Dodge City to Cimarron, as well as improvements on a section of U.S. Highway 83 between Liberal and Garden City.

Younger said KDOT is in the process of putting projects together for the U.S.-54 stretch.

"Right now, our intent is to break that into three pieces with the first project being in and around the ethanol plant there at Hayne," he said. "Hopefully, we can get that project out for 2016 with the other two projects to follow after that. We're trying to get to (bid) lettings as quickly as possible here. We know the quicker we get them out the door, the better for everybody."

Younger said the Hwy. 54 project is being pursued and developed under a “design to a budget” philosophy.

“We’ve got a set number of dollars to allocate to the project, and the key is how much work can we get done for that X number of dollars,” he said.

Younger said a portion of U.S.-54 is currently in the process of being four laned in Pratt and Kingman counties.

“We’re biting off pieces of U.S.-54 and continuing to four lane pieces of it kind of working from both directions now, ultimately going to meet somewhere in there,” Younger said.

King explained KDOT has about a half a billion dollars of fixed assets such as land, buildings, equipment and dump trucks, and the goal is to do the best job possible with those tools.

King then explained where KDOT gets its funding.

“Legislators have given us our money,” he said. “About half of our funds come from the feds, and the other half comes from the state. On the half that comes from the state, about half of that comes from the sales tax.”

KDOT has a cash flow projection for the period of 2010 to 2020, and part of that is an infusion of cash to help pay for the fixed assets.

“We’re also projected to borrow some money,” he said. “We’re going to try to borrow as little as we can, but also, we know that we have to go out there to complete the T-WORKS program.”

At the federal level, King said KDOT receives funding from motor fuel taxes.

“We’re at that breakover point where we’re starting to project for the first time ever a decline in revenue coming from the motor fuel taxes,” he said. “That’s not solely because we’re driving less miles. We have more people. We’re driving a few more miles. It’s just that we’re so much more efficient with our vehicles.”

King said about 12 percent of KDOT’s operating budget goes to debt.

“We have about \$1.7 billion of debt currently,” he said.

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