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Edna (Eddie) M. Grover-Bisker

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(NOTE: I happen to work for the Missouri Department of Transportation but I am writing this letter as a concerned citizen.)

Dear Editor:

It seems that one of the only things that Missouri's candidates for governor can agree on is that all of them want the power to directly appoint the state transportation director. Republican Matt Blunt has expressed this view. Democrat incumbent Bob Holden and his primary opponent, Claire McCaskill, have also said the same.

The Missouri Constitution has vested our transportation management in the Missouri Highways and Transportation Commission for a good reason. It is an independent body. The governor already appoints the six members of the Highways and Transportation Commission. They, in turn, appoint the Missouri Department of Transportation executive director. This arrangement is intended to somewhat insulate highway decisions from the manipulation by powerful politicians in the legislature and governor's office.

In recent years the Missouri Department of Transportation has come under increased criticism. It has become quite popular for politicians to call for more "accountability" by removing the constitutionally independent status of the department, as if, making transportation more political would somehow make it better.

It appears as if everyone campaigning for governor wants to be held accountable for Missouri's roads. That is nice, but it's hard to figure how making a governor accountable is any better than observing and criticizing the current management of MoDOT. Furthermore, the governor, any governor would be more likely to play political games with transportation policy than an independent commission and director. In the subtle manipulations of politicians, accountability is likely to translate into transportation policy made for the wrong reasons.

In fact, a good deal of the trouble engulfing MoDOT stems from its inability to complete the 1992 highway plan which came because of pressure (from the governor's office) to increase spending in the St. Louis area. This occurred even

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though the governor had no direct control over the director. Imagine what political games could be played if the governor was the direct boss?

It is possible for a political appointee to be a good director. However, that is not the answer to Missouri's transportation problems. Campaigning politicians like the sound of the idea. It sounds authoritative. It gets positive feedback from people who are unhappy with our transportation system. It sounds like leadership. It sounds like the promise of better roads. Lets face it, holding MoDOT "accountable" sounds courageous.

The fact is that MoDOT has become a very good operation in recent years. It's problems with the 1992 plan are behind it. No money was stolen or wasted. Today, independent audits show road-spending efficiency in Missouri is among the best in the nation. Project cost estimates are coming in right on the money.

It is MoDOT's responsibility to provide the best transportation system it can while operating within the funding levels set for it by the Missouri Legislature. Simply put, they are doing the best they can with what is given to them. Missouri has the seventh largest highway system in the country - 32,000 miles! Yet, we spend the least per road mile of any contiguous state; we rank 47th in the revenue received per road mile. In fiscal year 2002, only 63 cents of each highway user dollar went for state road and bridge improvements. While spending has gone down, the number of trucks and cars using the roads has dramatically increased. I think that government can always be more efficient. But our current road situation is not a crisis caused by a lack of MoDOT accountability. MoDOT simply does not have all the money it needs to maintain our roads.

Missouri's current transportation problems are a direct result of insufficient funding. Injecting even more politics into the already difficult job of managing the state's transportation system is not a good idea. We are hearing so much about it because it sounds good politically, not because it will improve transportation in Missouri.

Sincerely,

Edna (Eddie) M. Grover-Bisker