

Maintaining and improving city streets is a top priority of municipal leaders across Arkansas. Conway, which features several roundabouts that help ease congestion in the city, has undergone a professional assessment of its streets to determine how best to invest in its transportation infrastructure moving forward.



Using data to drive infrastructure decisions

By Amy Whitehead

In my conversations with municipal leaders from around the state, infrastructure is consistently one of the top economic development issues that is mentioned as a local priority. The needs will look different for different sized cities, but the conversation will often revolve around new infrastructure development, whether it be extending sewer and water lines to a site, building sidewalks, walking and biking trails, or creating new streets to improve traffic flow.

However, many cities struggle to maintain their aging infrastructure, particularly those cities with population loss or little to no growth. Without strategic, long-term thinking related to infrastructure, a city can quickly find itself in a situation where its assets are declining and there are not enough dollars locally to maintain the systems at current levels.

According to the 2014 Report Card for Arkansas Infrastructure, produced by the American Society of Civil Engineers, Arkansas's highway infrastructure

received a grade of D+. A 2015 presentation to the Governor's Working Group on Highway Funding, delivered by Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department (AHTD) personnel, stated that there are 17,518 miles of city streets and 1,007 bridges maintained by cities. For state highways, AHTD was predicting a \$16.8 billion shortfall for state highways over the next 10 years. Revenue for state and city highways is limited, and the future of federal funding levels of infrastructure is still uncertain.

Amid that uncertainty, the City of Conway is taking steps to ensure that limited city dollars are being used for the maximum return on investment, so that the city has the ability to maintain adequate service for residents and businesses. The Conway Street and Engineering Department worked with a consultant to assess the current quality and usable life of every mile of pavement that the city is responsible for maintaining. The consultant assigned a Pavement Condition Index (PCI)

number to each street. A newly constructed street will have a PCI of 100. The average PCI for Conway's pavement is 62, which is considered to be fair condition. Conway City Council member Shelley Mehl said that having an objective assessment of the pavement needs has made the process of spending limited street funds less subjective.

"In the past, many of the projects were made up of those streets reported by citizens to a council member or mayor," Mehl said. "Now we can use data to understand what areas have the greatest need and where our dollars could have the most impact. This ability to prioritize also helps us coordinate with our local utility provider, Conway Corp, to identify utilities that could be impacted by roadwork."

According to Mehl, Conway is one of the only cities in Arkansas to do this type of pavement assessment.

Having data related to a street's projected life span also helps the city understand when re-paving a particular section would be a bad investment. According to Finley Vinson, Conway Street and Engineering Department Director, if a street is near the end of its life cycle, it is not cost effective to pave it when the improvement won't significantly extend the life of the street.

"If we can pave a street and extend the life of the street by 15 years, the city and its residents can feel good about the return on that investment. If a street will need

to be re-constructed within a few years regardless of new pavement, we can redirect resources in the short term to other streets that will reap a greater long-term benefit."

Vinson believes the need for reliable data will mean the city will need to collect this pavement quality data on an annual basis to ensure that the underlying assumptions of the modeling are correct. With \$5 million dollars a year in projected maintenance needs and only \$1 million in the pavement maintenance budget, the city will at least have a clear priority list to keep streets at a serviceable level. The city will first focus on main arterials and collector streets, with residential maintenance being lower on the priority list.

As new policies are formulated for infrastructure development at the national level, cities would be wise to carefully evaluate its needs so that any commitment of local funds for new infrastructure doesn't occur at the cost of neglecting maintenance of existing systems. Assessing the current state of infrastructure and collecting data to make meaningful decisions will help remove some of the guesswork from city budgeting decisions.



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