

Let the People Decide

Imagine for a moment you are sitting in front of your employees at your next staff meeting. You tell them that now is the time for drastic change. You explain to them you have had an epiphany. You have decided to abolish all current pricing structures and revert back to the prices of 1987. Meaningful maintenance of your company's physical assets is no longer necessary. Investing in the long term sustainability of the organization is no longer a priority. After all, none of that is possible with a 1987 revenue structure.

As outrageous as that may seem, it is the actual financial operating procedure of the South Carolina Department of Transportation. The state agency charged with maintaining and improving the state's largest asset is currently funded on a 1987 revenue model. This antiquated funding structure would fully explain why we have 416 load restricted bridges, 884 structurally deficient bridges, a third of primary and interstate highways rated as "poor" or "mediocre," and half of our secondary roads rated as "poor" or "mediocre." Given the safety and economic development implications of this issue (not to mention the fact that infrastructure improvement and maintenance is a core function of government), you would think South Carolina elected officials would be leading the way in providing viable solutions. Unfortunately, aside from a few bold and visionary leaders, the state's elected leaders have placed politics first and pragmatism second.

In Greenville County alone, we have 51 deficient bridges. Think about that. Sooner or later, you and your family will travel over what the SCDOT deems to be a "deficient" bridge. According to the recent report of the Greenville County Citizens Roads Advisory Commission, at the current level of funding, it will take "anywhere from 21 to 45 years for some of the smaller municipalities (in Greenville County) to resurface all of their roads and up to 83 years for SCDOT to do the same." Best case scenario would mean that smaller Greenville County municipalities could resurface all their roads by 2035. Worst case scenario would mean 2097 for the resurfacing of SCDOT maintained roads. At this rate, today's infants will be in their 80's by the time the SCDOT completes its rounds of resurfacing.

In every challenge, there is an opportunity, and the members of Greenville County Council have a golden one. While Greenville County Council cannot address the state's infrastructure challenges, they can improve the situation here at home. Even better, they can empower the people to address the situation if they deem to do so.

Members of the Greenville County Council displayed a significant amount of will and leadership this past November by setting up the Greenville County Citizens Roads Advisory Commission. The 18 member commission, composed of people representing the various municipalities and unincorporated areas of Greenville County, worked for months studying all aspects of Greenville

County's transportation network. The GCCRAC held seven community forums attended by hundreds of citizens and received 888 surveys regarding transportation related issues. The people of this committee should be commended for their work as their final product was void of political partiality and geographical bias. The 300 page report (can be accessed in its entirety at greenvillecounty.org/roadscommission/) truly articulates the dire nature of the situation in every municipality and throughout the unincorporated areas of Greenville County. On April 1, the GCCRAC presented its findings to Greenville County Council. That brings us to where we are today. In the coming weeks, Greenville County Council will be studying and discussing the GCCRAC report. Basically, the members of Greenville County Council have two options. One, they can do nothing. Two, they can embrace the recommended projects found within the GCCRAC report and take this issue to the people. By exercising option number two, the people of Greenville County will have the opportunity to go to the polls in November and vote for or against an additional penny sales tax. Revenue derived from the sales tax would be directly applied to address projects only in Greenville County, all of which would be listed on the ballot.

Simply put, the choice before the members of Greenville County Council is a no brainer. An issue of this importance should have the direct feedback of the people. If the people are willing to pay an additional penny sales tax on retail related expenditures to fund Greenville County transportation related projects, the people can vote for it. If the people choose to not pay an additional penny sales tax, the people can vote against it. Either way, the voters of Greenville County deserve the right to decide. Let's be clear about one thing. A Greenville County Council vote for the referendum is not a vote for a tax increase nor is it a vote against a tax increase; it is simply a vote of confidence in the people of Greenville County and their ability to make the best decision.

So while long term funding solutions to one of the state's core functions remains mired in the political gridlock of the SC legislature, local government can proactively lead by providing the people of Greenville County the greatest symbol of a democratic society – a vote. I call on the elected leaders of Greenville County to let us, the people of Greenville County, decide whether or not we believe that the additional investment is worth the additional reward. If you agree, call, write and/or email your County Councilor today and tell him/her you want the right to decide come November.

The Greater Greer Chamber of Commerce, a 714 member business advocacy organization that serves the Greater Greer area, endorsed a resolution supporting the people of Greenville County and their right to vote on this critical issue. The full text of the resolution can be found by visiting greerchamber.com.