

Public-private partnerships key economic tool

Newspaper headlines and stories on our Facebook feeds remind us that our state's current budget issues leave little money available for the repairs that our roads and bridges desperately need.

It is even more challenging to find funding for the new construction and expansion that is needed to support economic development and job growth in West Virginia.

But lawmakers have tools in the toolbox to help, even in times of budget crisis, which is why it is important that the legislature take action to allow public-private partnerships to continue.

In 2008, the West Virginia Legislature passed the Public-Private Transportation Facilities Act and renewed it in 2013. Public-private partnerships (PPP) change the way governments repair and construct roads by allowing state agencies to join forces with the business sector. The act allows the West Virginia



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Division of Highways to partner with a private company on the design and construction of otherwise public transportation facilities.

In that time, the Division of Highways has utilized the act to help finance four major initiatives: The Coalfields Expressway (Mullens Connector to East County Route 12/1), the upgrading of a 14-mile section of US 35 (WV 869 to Mason County Route 40), a section of Corridor H (Kerens to US 219 Connector) and the just-announced Ohio River bridge to be constructed between Brooke

County and Brilliant, Ohio. Once its complete, the bridge will cross the Ohio River, south of Wellsburg, connecting Route 2 with Brilliant.

It's a win-win situation for business and state government.

Businesses view these projects as investments as their government partners make payments over an agreed timetable. Public-private partnerships save states money because instead of building a road in several pieces over many years and being affected by increased construction and material costs, the project can be completed in a shorter span of time with little effect from inflation.

Our state's residents also win because strong infrastructure helps provide communities with additional economic development opportunities that are just as needed as the roads that are built to drive them.

The Public-Private Transportation Facilities Act was amended by the

Legislature in 2013 to extend the time during which the Division of Highways may enter into comprehensive agreements with developers until June 30, 2017. It is important to call upon lawmakers to end the current sunset provision.

The completion of Route 2 and I-68 are significant priorities if our region is to reach its full economic potential. But the scarcity of funding has left these two projects on the backburner for far too long.

As our state continues to search for economic growth, it only makes sense that we keep our highways officials equipped with every available tool to develop our transportation infrastructure to attract business.

The Route 2 and I-68 expansions are perfect examples of projects that can attract industry and foster economic success by improving access to the shale-rich regions of northern West Virginia.

Our welcome signs may state: "Open for Business;" but how open to business can we be if we don't allow for these important public-private partnerships to continue, especially as they relate to building a foundation that is vital for growth? How welcoming is it to travel over roads that are falling apart or to be allowed to go only so far before reaching the end of the road?

Opportunity for growth and to save our struggling infrastructure is slipping through the many cracks of our battered roads and bridges. We owe it to ourselves to continue these important partnerships. We need our lawmakers to keep the toolbox open.

Charles Clements is the executive director of the Route 2 and I-68 Authority. Clements served in the West Virginia House of Delegates from 1996-2000 and was appointed as a member of Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin's Blue Ribbon Commission in 2012.