

## **The State Aid Program: A Vital Program to Counties in Arkansas**

*Written by: Hon. Wes Fowler, Madison County Judge*

The State Aid Program administered by the State Aid Division of the Arkansas State Highway & Transportation Department (AHTD) is a vital program to the system of public roads in Arkansas. There are approximately 16,440 miles of Interstate, State and U.S. Highways in Arkansas and approximately 13,737 miles of city streets. How many miles of public roads, exclusive of highways and city streets, are there in Arkansas? Answer: approximately 68,798 miles.

In 1973 the General Assembly created the State Aid Program and subsequently in 1975 found and determined that additional State Funds were necessary for the construction of State Aid Roads essential to the public health, safety and welfare of local communities of the State. Ark. Code § 27-72-302 establishes the system of 15,000 miles of State Aid Roads comprised of the major and minor connector and collector routes that feed into local trade areas of the State Highway System. Contractors and suppliers of asphalt, asphalt cement, and bituminous surface treatment should be well acquainted with the State Aid Program. The program delivers valuable services in the construction of hard surfaces on rural roads in: letting, designing, establishing the standards and specifications, inspection and administration. David Mayo, State Aid Engineer, says: "Since 1973, over \$662 million has been spent, over 11,000 miles of county roads have been improved, and almost 800 structures have been built or replaced through the State Aid Program. I feel that the program is very important to the overall county road system and I am honored to represent the AHTD in the administration of the program."

As a County Judge for 9 years and President of the County Judges Association of Arkansas ("CJA") I can give you an example of how important the State Aid Program is to the counties in Arkansas. Recently, in Madison County we completed a project that built a complete new road into the Butterball Turkey Plant, the largest employer in Madison County. Prior to construction of this new access road all traffic had to travel thru a residential neighborhood and past our Senior Center, County Library and County Health Unit which was not very safe because they are all located on city streets and this was the only way to get to the plant. Now the plant can be accessed straight from a state highway using this connector road bypassing all of the aforementioned making it much safer. Also since construction of this road in 2006 there has been additional industrial property constructed on this new connector road adding to our local tax base. Had this money not been available we simply would not have been able to build this much needed road. This is just an example of one road we have been able to build for Madison County. David Mayo and his staff are very service oriented, dedicated and accommodating to the needs of the counties.

Recently, the CJA has commenced a campaign to inform Legislators about the importance and services rendered throughout Arkansas from the State Aid Program and the State Aid Division. We want to raise awareness to the rising costs of road construction and road maintenance. Figures compiled by the State Aid Engineer show that the costs of county road construction have dramatically increased from 2002 to 2007 as follows: 61% for ACHM (Asphalt Concrete Hot Mix or Asphalt); 81% for Base & ACHM; 86% for Base & Double Seal (Double Bituminous Surface Treatment) and Reconstruction, Base & ACHM; and 89% for Reconstruction, Base & Double Seal. Projects for Base have increased 26% and projects to reseal have increased 63% since 2007.

The State Aid Program is funded by a one cent excise tax on motor fuels which results in approximately 20 million to 21 million dollars into the State Aid Program. In contrast, the Mississippi State Aid Program from which the Arkansas State Aid Program was modeled operates on an annual budget in excess of \$175 Million. Significant increases in funding are necessary to keep pace with dramatic increased costs. Also, monetary investment in the State Aid Program results in direct and equitable investment in rural Arkansas. In my opinion, economic development, safety and other benefits engendered by government will not be adequately delivered to rural Arkansas without major investments in the State Aid Program.