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February 4, 2008

## Road bond issue full of potholes

By Bob Johnson  
The Associated Press

Alabama legislators are uncertain about a proposed \$275 million bond issue to fund construction of new roads and bridges or repair old ones, according to an Associated Press survey of lawmakers.

Officials with the Association of County Commissions of Alabama are seeking the bond issue, which would be similar to a \$200 million bond issue for roads and bridges approved by voters in 2000.

County officials say there are more than 1,500 bridges on Alabama county roads that have received failing grades under federal standards.

But because of slow growth in tax revenues, Alabama legislators are facing the prospect of cutting back the state budgets for the coming fiscal year. Many legislators responding to the AP survey said they were undecided about a \$275 million bond issue, with some concerned about where the money would come from to pay off the bonds.

The proposed bond issue is one of the topics that could come up for debate in the Legislature, which begins its 2008 regular session at noon Tuesday. Gov. Bob Riley will give his annual "state of the state" address to lawmakers Wednesday evening.

In the Senate, 55 percent of those responding said they were undecided, while 38 percent support the bond issue and 7 percent were opposed. In the House, 41 percent said they support a bond issue for roads and bridges, 20 percent were opposed and 39 percent undecided. With less than 50 percent support in both chambers, it would be difficult to pass the measures.

"It's hard to say on the one hand that we are going to increase spending, yet on the other hand we have to decrease the budget," House Speaker Seth Hammett said.

But Hammett said there is a need for additional funding for roads and bridges, mostly because of the steep increases in the cost of asphalt, concrete and steel.

Legislators were asked if they had other ideas for funding county road and bridge work. Some of the responses included: taxing billboards, increasing the license fee for commercial vehicles, building toll roads and bridges and using some of the money currently going into a savings account funded by oil and gas revenue.

Rep. Mac Gipson, R-Prattville, is sponsoring a separate bill to allow county commissions to raise the gas tax in their counties by 5 or 6 cents a gallon for roads and bridges. He said it's wrong to avoid the issue just because this year's budget will be tight.

"I don't think there is a time when we can stop thinking about our infrastructure shortcomings," Gipson said. "The farther behind we get, the more expensive it's going to be."

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