

# **Building Tennessee's Tomorrow: Anticipating the State's Infrastructure Needs**

July 2002 through June 2007

The seal of the Tennessee Department of Transportation is a circular emblem. It features a central five-pointed star with a building illustration on each point. The star is set against a background of a road winding through a landscape. The words "Livable Communities" are written along the top inner edge of the circle, "Economic Development" along the right inner edge, and "Quality Infrastructure" along the bottom inner edge.

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## The Public Infrastructure Needs Inventory – It Matters

The Public Infrastructure Needs Inventory is both a product and a continuous process, one that has been useful in

- short-term and long-range planning,
- providing a framework for funding decisions,
- increasing public awareness of infrastructure needs and
- fostering better communication and collaboration among agencies and decision makers.

### ***Short-Term and Long-Range Planning: Often the One Opportunity for Proactive Thinking***

The Public Infrastructure Needs Inventory has become a tool for setting priorities and making informed decisions by all stakeholders. Many decision makers have noted that in a time of tight budgets and crisis-based, reactive decisions, the annual inventory process is the one opportunity they have to set funding issues aside for a moment and think proactively and broadly about their very real infrastructure needs. For most officials in rural areas and in smaller cities, the inventory is the closest thing they have to a capital improvement program. Without the inventory, they would have little opportunity or incentive to consider their infrastructure needs. Because the inventory is not limited to needs that can be funded in the short term, it may be the only reason they have to consider the long-range benefits of infrastructure. Among other things, the inventory has documented the limited scope of capital improvement programming (see Table 6) and is being used to encourage that approach.

### ***Decision Making: Matching Critical Needs to Limited Funding Opportunities***

The Public Infrastructure Needs Inventory provides the basic information that helps state and local officials match needs with funding, especially in the absence of a formal capital improvement program. At the same time, it provides the basic information needed by the development districts to update their respective *Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Reports* required annually by the Federal Economic Development Administration. Unless a project is listed in that document, it will not be considered for funding by that agency. Information from the inventory has been used to develop lists of projects

suitable for other types of state and federal grants as well. For example many projects that have received Community Development Block Grants were originally discovered in discussions of infrastructure needs with local government officials. And it has helped state decision makers identify gaps between critical needs and state, local, and federal funding, including an assessment of whether various communities can afford to meet their infrastructure needs or whether some thinking needs to be done at the state level about how to help them. Most recently, the Joint Legislative Study Committee on Rural Water Needs has used the information about water supply and wastewater projects from this inventory their evaluation of unmet needs.

### ***A Special Case: Annual Review of Conditions and Needs of Public School Facilities***

The schools portion of the inventory is structured so that the condition of all schools is known, not just the ones in need of repair or replacement. Data can be retrieved from the database and analyzed to identify particular types of needs, such as technology. This information is useful in pinpointing pressing needs for particular schools and districts, as well as providing an overview of statewide needs. This unique statewide database of information about Tennessee's public schools facilities, conditions and needs has been used by the Comptroller's Office of Education Accountability in its review of schools placed on notice by the Department of Education.

### ***Increased Public Awareness, Better Communication and Collaboration***

The state's infrastructure needs have been reported to a larger public audience, and the process has fostered better communication between the development districts, local and state officials, and decision makers. The resulting report has become a working document used at the local, regional and state levels. It gives voice to the often-underserved small towns and rural communities. Each update of the report provides an opportunity for reevaluation and re-examination of projects and for improvements in the quality of the inventory and the report itself. It is unique in terms of its broad scope and comprehensive nature. Through the inventory process, development districts have expanded their contacts, communication and collaboration with agencies not traditionally sought after (local boards of education, utility districts, the Tennessee Department of Transportation), and they have strengthened personal relationships and trust with their more traditional local and state contacts. Infrastructure needs are being identified, assessed, heard, and addressed locally, while being documented and published to the Tennessee General Assembly, various state agencies, and decision makers for further assessment and consideration.