

## **Brief History of TDOT**

In 1915 when the first administrative agency was organized to build roads and maintain them, state leadership successfully set the state on a path propelling Tennessee's transportation system to one of the best in the nation. Tennesseans today can feel proud their investments are being used prudently as we continue the great 100-year tradition of a transportation system that is safe, efficient and at the forefront of innovation.

### **Pre-1915**

Leading up to the creation of the Tennessee Highway Department, road building activities were primarily directed by the governor or the legislature. With no central authority, building good roads was neither planned nor well-managed. Road associations began to push specific highways. With emphasis on "getting out of the mud," and recognizing that planning was needed, it became apparent to the state that the job was too big for counties to handle alone. In 1915 the first state government authority to oversee transportation services was created. A forerunner to TDOT, the creation of the six-person State Highway Commission was approved. At that time the state system had less than 5,000 miles of road.

### **New department, first gas tax: 1923**

With federal funding beginning 1916, the highway commission funneled money to counties. As the scope of the program grew, a voluntary commission had not provided much direction and in 1919, a three-person salaried commission was appointed. The basic structure of the highway department was formed creating nine divisions including four field divisions in Knoxville, Chattanooga, Nashville and Jackson.

Gov. Austin Peay was considered to be the "Road Building Governor." In his 1922 election campaign, he made the highway department a major issue saying, "politics and roads don't mix" and promised to overhaul the department. Tennessee roads lagged behind border states and Tennessee was known as a detour state.

In his first year, Gov. Peay reorganized state government and placed one commissioner in charge of the Department of Highways and Public Works. Gov. Peay appointed J.G. Creveling as commissioner and instructed him to clean house. Creveling was unable to do this since there weren't enough qualified people to take their positions.

Debates across the nation raged over issuing bonds versus the "pay-as-you-go" approach. In many cases those impatient for roads relented to using bonds. In Tennessee, Gov. Peay stood steadfast in his belief that you only spend what you receive in revenue and thus in his first message to the legislature, Gov. Peay proposed a two-cent per gallon gas tax. It also resulted in shifting the tax burden from property owners to motorists, those who actually use the roads. The "pay-as-you-go" philosophy still continues in Tennessee.

### **Interstate highways underway: 1925**

By the mid-1920s, twelve widely known interstate highways existed in the South. One of the most traveled was the north-south Dixie Highway, which crossed the state in both Middle and East Tennessee.

Unlike a continuous route, the Dixie Highway meandered more than 4,000 miles in two parallel routes with connectors and side roads to special attractions. The Western Division ran from Lake Michigan down to Nashville, Chattanooga, Atlanta, and Tallahassee. The Eastern Division began at Lake Huron and traveled a route to Knoxville, Chattanooga, Atlanta and Jacksonville. In 1918 the Carolina route was added and traveled through East Tennessee.

The 500-mile long Memphis-to-Bristol Highway, although not originally an interstate route, tied in with other highways and functioned in much the same way. Soon after its creation in 1915, the Tennessee State Highway Department designated this corridor as State Route 1 and made it the top road priority. In 1926 the state designated about two-thirds of it as U.S. 70, the major east-west corridor in the region. In the late 1920s the entire route became part of the Broadway of America Highway from California to New York. State Route 1 remained the main east-west route through the state until the completion of Interstate 40 in the late 1960s.

### **The Great Depression and “Retrenchment”: 1930**

The 1930s was a decade many would refer to as “retrenchment” of the highway department. Shortly after the untimely death of Gov. Austin Peay, politics took root in the highway department with Gov. Henry Horton trading roads for legislative votes on many issues. Shortly after reelection in 1930, the banking system collapsed nationwide, however one particular Tennessee bank owned by a Horton protégé held millions of state deposits resulting in a significant loss to the state. Impeachment never occurred, causing one historian to say, “Horton bought his way out with pardons, jobs and roads.”

In 1931, the “bloody July massacre” occurred in the highway department as a result of the discharge of all maintenance and construction forces due to a failure to fund it by the Tennessee General Assembly. A six-month stalemate battle over issuing bonds between the legislature and the governor found legislative members leaving Nashville without funding the department.

During the era traditionally known as the Great Depression years (1930 to 1946), highway expenditures were over two-thirds less than they had been in 1930 when \$30 million had been spent. With economic disaster across the country, transportation departments were finding their revenues were being robbed by state officials and placed in the general funds of states, a tactic that was often been repeated by both federal and state governments over the decades to come. This resulted in the federal government passing laws reducing federal funds for states using this tactic.

Tennessee is a prime example of the national trend in the federal increase of funds. Between 1922 and 1930, Tennessee received about \$1.5 million each year. But, in 1933, the state received almost \$11 million in federal dollars. This was primarily due to President Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal” which attempted to put people to work in federal programs such as highway construction projects. The New Deal also resulted in Tennessee’s participation in projects

referred to as landscaping, roadside development and beautification. This concept initiated in 1934 resulted in several road-side parks, pull-offs and overlooks for motorists to enjoy.

### **The World War Almost Halts Construction: 1945**

During the early 1940s many states had come to rely on federal funds but they were diverted for construction on roads essential in supporting World War II efforts. Some state funds were used to help improve roads. During 1943-1944, the state spent only \$3.8 million in a program called the Betterment Program to improve roads key to the transporting troops and equipment for the war. A skeleton crew kept the highway department going as many men enlisted in the war. In 1944 Congress amended the first federal aid act of 1916 by establishing funding for primary, secondary and then urban roads for the first time. The law also designated the National System of Interstate Highways which was in anticipation of the war ending. It set up funding levels for roadwork over three years. However, funding an interstate system across the nation would not occur until over a decade later when a Tennessean would play a major role in the U.S. Interstate System as we know it today.

### **The Interstate System and Tennessee: 1956**

President Dwight Eisenhower is due much credit for pushing through legislation which had a substantial impact on Tennessee's highway system and the nation's. His efforts were memorialized in 1991 when Congress named the nation's interstate system, the Dwight D. Eisenhower System of Interstate and Defense Highway. Like all key milestones in a nation's history, many were involved. Tennessee's Albert Gore, Sr. was the U.S. House of Representative sponsor, guiding the legislation to approval. Tennessee was allocated 1,047.6 miles. Initially, existing roads were to be used, but, the Tennessee Highway Department determined new locations for the state's interstate system would be more practical. Tennessee's first interstate project was a section of I-65 at the Alabama border in Ardmore, Tennessee. In 1987, Tennessee completed its original interstate allocation with the completion of I-440 in Nashville.

### **Landmark Supreme Court Ruling in Tennessee: 1971**

In the 1960s and 1970s the Tennessee Highway Department was primarily concerned in building its interstate system. At the height of this construction era, Tennessee had nearly 8,000 employees as compared to 4,663 positions allocated by the state legislature in 2014. In response to a nationwide movement for closer coordination among transportation modes, the name of the department was changed in 1972 to the Tennessee Department of Transportation. As more and more interstates were being developed, constructed and completed, new locations became issues as communities raised concerns about negative impacts. Interstate-40 later referred to as "America's Highway" would be forever impacted by a landmark case.

A 2,554-mile-long route, I-40 stretches across the U.S. from North Carolina to California through Tennessee. Tennessee has 455 miles, the longest section of any other state. In the original plan, Overton Park in Memphis was included. There was a time when parks and low income neighborhoods were prime real estate for highway planners. In a landmark case, *Citizens to Preserve Overton Park v. Volpe*, the U.S. Supreme Court changed the course of I-40 and

interstates nationwide that were intended to pass through locations like Overton Park. Credit is generally given to a group of women, dubbed by the media as “little old ladies in tennis shoes.” They began the fight and were relentless in their campaign to stop I-40 from splitting their beloved Overton Park. For years the battle raged before finally landing in the U.S. Supreme Court in 1971 and the decision rested on laws approved five years earlier. In 1966 Congress said that interstate highways could no longer pass through public park spaces unless there was no feasible and prudent alternative. The Supreme Court ruled in the Memphis case there was a feasible and prudent alternative for I-40, a planned beltway. In January 1981, the Overton Park section of I-40 was deleted from the master plan. Today, I-40 goes around the park and Tennessee and all states have a new approach to road building.

### **Better Roads Program, largest program ever: 1986**

In the 1980s Tennessee had a significant backlog of needed projects and motorists believed Tennessee’s roads were falling apart. In his last year in office, Gov. Lamar Alexander proposed a massive program projected to cost \$3.3 billion over 13 years. TDOT’s Better Roads Program was an ambitious highway improvement plan that included a three-cent increase in the gasoline tax. It was phased in over three years and was used to fund six interstate-type parkways, fifteen priority projects, and allowed TDOT to accelerate the existing highway program. Tennessee has a long history of funding its roads through a “pay-as-you-go” system. The gas tax has not changed since 1989. For 25 years, it has remained at 21.40 cents, one of the lowest in the nation.

One of the largest projects identified in the Better Roads Program was Interstate 840. This 78-mile route to the south around Nashville was an active TDOT project for 26 years, partly due to size of the massive project, but also due to law suits filed against the department over environmental issues in the late 1990s. When completed in 2012, the total project cost \$757 million. Commercial and business development along the route has already proven SR 840s value by connecting several communities through southern Middle Tennessee. It also serves as a viable option for travelers seeking to avoid the Nashville urban area.

### **Deaths on Hatchie River Bridge produce national inspection changes: 1989**

On April 1, 1989, three spans of the north bound lanes of US 51 over the Hatchie River collapsed and sent eight people to their deaths. This tragic incident and the investigation of the bridge failure resulted in the TDOT Bridge Inspection Program becoming one of the most respected in the nation.

With this failure and a 1987 collapse in New York, the FHWA strengthened its enforcement and training on stream scour (erosion) and detection of scour on all bridges in the nation in 1991. Analysis and design manuals were developed for addressing scour at bridges. Scour design for new bridges is now a standard practice for all hydraulics engineers in the nation. Since that time, Tennessee has increased its expenditure on bridges to well over \$100 million compared to \$1 million before the 1989 failure.

In 2009, TDOT began a Better Bridges Program, the largest bridge program ever to address 200 structurally deficient bridges. In four years, TDOT replaced or repaired 200 state owned bridges

reducing the number of structurally deficient bridges on local and state systems to 5.9 percent. This brought Tennessee far below the national average of 11 percent.

Traveling from the east to the west coast, I-40 is a life line through the nation. As the talk of a possible earthquake along the New Madrid Fault Line increased in the 1990s, TDOT bridge engineers began to assess the risk of failure to the Hernando DeSoto Bridge (I-40) across the Mississippi River in Memphis. Thus began a 15-year seismic retrofit project designed to protect this bridge and its approaches in the case of an earthquake of up to 7.7. The bridge is located about 100 miles from the same fault line that led to an 1811 earthquake. Assessments showed that a \$4.5 billion economic impact to the U.S. would occur if the bridge were lost. The project is a collaborative effort between TDOT and our Arkansas state partners with well over \$200 million dollars spent by completion in 2015.

### **The move to an efficient transportation system: 1993**

In the mid-nineties, TDOT began looking at ways to be more efficient in moving motorists. Roads were no longer the complete answer to a good transportation system. A move across the nation inspired by environmental concerns about air quality prompted states to look at ways to move traffic more efficiently and reduce congestion. The first effort in Tennessee was installing high occupancy vehicle lanes in Nashville in 1993, followed by one of the most popular programs with motorists. Operating in all four urban areas, the TDOT HELP program was launched in 1999 with the philosophy that removing incidents, debris or disabled vehicles quickly from the highways would reduce congestion and improve safety. As increased interest in intelligent transportation systems grew, TDOT began an ITS system that would provide monitoring of the urban highway systems and give motorists tools to help them make good driving decisions.

### **Communities become involved: 2003**

In the 2002 election for governor, history is repeated 80 years later. TDOT became a hot button campaign issue for candidate Phil Bredesen who campaigned that TDOT needed a culture change. After winning election, there was a major philosophy shift to focus on communities helping TDOT find solutions to transportation issues. Environmental guidelines became a priority. Along with the Administrative Bureau and the Engineering Bureau, a third bureau was added, the Bureau of Environment and Planning. Public input was a priority in project development and a new focus on deliberate and careful planning of highway projects began. With a sluggish economy in 2009, President Barack Obama and Congress initiated a new program to get people back to work called the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

### **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century version of the 1931 National Industrial Recovery Act, ARRA: 2009**

ARRA included a host of programs to help stimulate the economy. Transportation programs were one of the priorities. TDOT was well prepared to take immediate advantage of ARRA transportation projects, totaling \$48 billion for all states. Tennessee completed over 300 highway projects with the \$572 million received for highway infrastructure improvements, improved \$21 million of transit related services and completed an airport expansion with \$4 million.

## **Efficiencies and funding issues taking priority: 2011-Present**

Even though economic ills were beginning to subside, by 2011 many states were looking at funding options for their transportation system. As part of an overall top-to-bottom state review by Gov. Bill Haslam, newly appointed TDOT Commissioner John Schroer looked for ways to improve efficiencies by focusing on restructuring, expediting project delivery and improved processes. Those improvements have already saved TDOT millions of dollars and are expected to include more savings in the next decade. TDOT survived the recession financially, much better than most states because of its “no debt” status. However, it became clear that the flat tax system that began in the early 1900s may need to be revisited at least on the national level. While many elected officials recognize transportation is critical for a good economy, and additional funding is necessary, a solution has not been solidified.

From the early 1900s when a formal structure was organized to oversee transportation in Tennessee and a dedicated tax for transportation implemented, state leadership successfully set the state on a path propelling Tennessee’s transportation system to one of the best in the nation. Even with conservative stewardship for the last 100 years, Tennessee has declining resources and must focus on preservation and efficiency more than ever in order to maintain an excellent system. As decisions are made at the state and national level on the direction our transportation system will take, the public stewards of Tennessee’s transportation system will continue to be dedicated to meeting our obligations to taxpayers and motorists.