Opinion Column: Changing Course to Preserve America's Roads

For the US to retain its economic strength, we need to change course to stop the decline of our vast highway system and begin to reverse spiraling reconstruction costs. The condition of our roads and bridges continues to deteriorate each year, resulting in escalating and unaffordable costs for repair. To reverse transportation system failure nationwide, a significant change in policy is urgently needed.

Some states and local agencies are disproportionately devoting their transportation budgets to expanding or rebuilding roads once they reach crisis stage rather than on pavement preservation that will preserve and extend their life and save money in the long run.

In 2009, the **American Society of Civil Engineers** (ASCE) graded the nation's roads a "D-," down from a "D" in 2005. According to Federal Highway Administration, more than half of U.S. major roads are rated in "fair" or "poor" condition as of 2008.

CPAR urges support of legislation introduced in June 2011 to require the U.S. to establish "state of good repair" standards to serve as benchmarks for states to achieve. States would be required to use an "asset management approach" to develop state system preservation and renewal plans. The American Society of Civil Engineers' 2009 Report Card for America's Infrastructure was impetus for the legislation, sponsored by Sen. Barry Cardin (D-Maryland).

The nation's highways are valued at approximately $3 trillion. As responsible stewards of the system, present and future generations should not allow the investment to deteriorate.

Every dollar spent on road maintenance avoids $6 to $14 of expense later to rebuild a road that has irreparably deteriorated. A more proactive and less reactive approach to addressing pavement needs would result in greater cost savings and satisfaction for taxpaying motorists.

Spending money to keep good roads in good condition is the most cost-effective way to save America's highways. The key is applying the right treatment to the right pavement at the right time, but some road decision makers defer maintenance until it is too late. Some agencies, using "worst first" policies to try to stretch their limited budgets, are actually costing their cities, counties and states enormously more in the long run. Over time, keeping a mile of road in good condition can be achieved at substantially less than half the cost of letting that road deteriorate and then making major repairs – a wasteful practice that for too long has been common at the federal, state and local levels.

A pavement preservation program that promotes road sustainability consists of three components: preventive maintenance, minor rehabilitation (nonstructural) and some routine maintenance activities. The concept is simple: Just as regular exercise and proper nutrition stave off serious health problems in people, so regular proactive maintenance avoids the necessity for costly future road repairs. Practicing triage with our roads is irresponsible. It's like waiting until most of the patients are nearly dead and then trying to save a paltry few with the most expensive surgery possible.

Just as scientists have demonstrated the benefits of preventive medicine, engineers have proved the power of pavement preservation. Unfortunately, many federal, state and local transportation agencies for too long have been reactive, rather than proactive, in funding necessary maintenance. As a result, too many roads are totally reconstructed far sooner than would have been necessary had they received regular, proper maintenance -- the most efficient use of tax dollars.

The current approach to managing our highways, roads and bridges – often promoted by those who benefit financially from road construction – is bankrupting state and local budgets and debilitating roads and bridges. Ruinous short-term, "worst-first" policies need to be replaced with sustaining, long-term approaches involving pavement preservation using sound asset management principles.