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148 Legislative turtles are enough to make some run for office

There's so much frustration with politics as usual that maybe this is the year for grassroots candidates who are trying to win without big piles of money.

Anybody with a lick of common sense has got to be more than a little annoyed by what's been going on in the Statehouse. Just look at the recent week as GOP lawmakers, knowing a primary is just three weeks away, trotted out the always divisive abortion issue to throw a little red meat to voters and prove their "conservative credentials." At issue is a ban on abortions after 19 weeks, a measure that opponents are shouting is unconstitutional and scary because it will harm women (not to mention that men again are making decisions about women's bodies).

Then there was Gov. Nikki Haley's nonsensical veto of a \$40 million package of aid for the state's farmers who were smashed down by last year's flooding. The tone-deaf governor, who hands out incentives to corporate interests as if they were party favors, dug in her heels and said the state didn't do bailouts. Yeah, right. At least the legislature didn't have any of it, overriding her veto by landslide in the House and Senate.

Finally, after two years of vowing major changes to fix and maintain the state's potholed roads and decaying bridges, state lawmakers are putting final touches on a plan that is little better than half a haircut — it kicks the can down the road to getting real infrastructure fixes because it tries to borrow the state's way out of the problem and not investing enough money for roads for the last two decades.

With all of this going on, education is getting underfunded.

The state hasn't really dealt with tens of thousands of poor people without real health care. There's been too much foot-dragging with reforming ethics laws, despite the toppling of the state's number two and three elected officials in recent years.

It's enough to, say, make you want to run for office to smack incumbents on the side of their heads.

"I ain't blaming a single person in Columbia because we're the folks who keep electing these folks," said Great Falls resident Mike Fanning, a Democrat who faces state Sen. Creighton Coleman, D-Winnsboro, in the June 14 primary. "They're doing what

we have asked them to do because we keep reelecting them for doing it.

"If every time my dog chews on my sofa and I give him a cookie, he's going to tear up my sofa," said Fanning, long a critic of the state's billions of dollars of tax exemptions for special interests. "If every election, candidates keep resurrecting tired, old, divisive issues right before a primary and we keep electing them, then we deserve what we're getting, which is movement on nothing."

Duncan Mayor Lisa Cooley Scott is one of three Republicans trying to unseat state Sen. Lee Bright, the Spartanburg County legislator who has created a lot of enmity recently for trying to push through a bill to make people use bathrooms associated with their birth gender.

"Frankly, I'm sick and tired of us basically having an empty chair in Columbia," said Scott, a 53-year-old licensed social worker who runs a family real estate company. "He's made some gestures of things. They're celebrity headline-grabbing



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things that are not important issues and he hasn't addressed important issues."

She said she was running for Senate to do real work on real problems that real people have, such as fixing crumbling infrastructure with dedicated, recurring revenue and improving workforce development.

"Between Donald Trump and some of the people in our legislature, we have some very divisive factors going on, not only in our state, but in our country. We need to be united

and coming together instead of fighting each other."

South Carolina is fortunate to have some serious legislators who tackle big problems. But they keep getting stalled by legislative turtles who want us to keep our eyes on the hole, not the doughnut. Let's keep the serious ones and throw out the turtles.

Andy Brack is editor and publisher of Statehouse Report. Have a comment? Send it to: feedback@statehousereport.com.



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THEIR VIEW

Get something done on infrastructure

As state lawmakers enter the home stretch of this legislative session, they have a very clear mission to pass a comprehensive highway funding bill. Given the options that are on the table, they are likely to take a significant step forward but fall short of the needed long-term funding solution.

Even though the Legislature is on the cusp of taking a small step forward, it cannot afford to pass a bill that would likely face a veto from the governor, who is demanding restructuring of the Department of Transportation. Increased highway funding is now critical, and if the state's roads continue to deteriorate without significant added revenue it could begin to affect economic development and job recruitment.

We have agreed with the governor that DOT reform is an important part of the highway funding equation. It would be unfortunate for the Legislature to completely punt this issue to next year over a disagreement over reforms that at worst would not make the DOT any more dysfunctional and in fact could be an improvement over the current system.

The Senate's plan would use funding from the state sales tax on motor vehicles and DOT motor vehicle fees to give money to the state Transportation Infrastructure Bank that would then leverage it to borrow at least \$2.2 billion to be spent on specific projects already underway. That, in turn, would free up additional money to pay for other bridge and paving projects.

All told, the Senate plan would pump about \$3 billion to the state's infrastructure. It's a significant infusion of cash. However, it amounts to two to three years of work when you consider that the state's transportation shortfall has been estimated to be at least \$700 million per year, and perhaps as much as \$1.2 billion per year.

That said, given the late date in Columbia and the prospects that if this

effort fails nothing will be done this year, the Senate plan is the more preferable of the two on the table, even if it is debt-heavy. The House plan would spend about \$400 million on roads through the state budget.

In terms of accountability, both the House and Senate would have the governor appoint highway commissioners and both would have all Transportation Infrastructure Bank projects come to the DOT board for final approval, according to recent reports by Greenville News reporter Tim Smith. However, the House wants the commissioners and the transportation secretary to be subject to a confirmation vote by both the House and the Senate. The Senate maintains that confirmation is its sole responsibility.

It seems a small point that should be easily worked out when House and Senate negotiators discuss the bill. It certainly is trivial enough that it should not be allowed to doom the much-needed funding that would come to the state's roads, bridges and highways that are sorely in need of improvement.

It would be a failure if the Legislature did not agree on some measure of infrastructure funding this session. Lawmakers need to pass a bill that will be signed by Gov. Nikki Haley. Including needed DOT reforms is a reasonable way to do this.

Moving forward, the Legislature cannot use a \$3 billion one-time infusion of cash as a dodge for not coming back next year and addressing the need for a stable, long-term funding fix. If the Legislature does not address the ongoing funding deficit, it will not be long before ongoing infrastructure needs overrun this year's funding measure.

As we have said before, what is needed is a long-term increase in cash that bridges the estimated funding gap. That cash can come from reallocation of some existing revenue, increased funding using available recurring funds in the state budget (some of a \$1.2 billion surplus this year is recurring and could be given to transportation needs), and by increasing the state's gasoline tax and reforming the state's motor vehicle sales tax.

These changes will not likely happen during this election year. But legislators should come back next year, after approving short-term funding, and permanently fix the highway funding deficit that is facing South Carolina.

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