

Title: **DOT: the test case for reform**
 Author: By Phil Noble
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VIEWPOINT

DOT: the test case for reform

By Phil Noble

Simple math: High Cost + Bad Roads = Corruption

To say that there is corruption in the South Carolina Department of Transportation is like saying it's dark at night.

The question is will the current 'reform' effort shed any light in the darkness or is this simply the case of the day following the night – only to see the darkness return. We'll see.

State highway departments, especially in the South, have been notoriously corrupt since the 1930s when states first began to spend significant money to pave dirt roads. To adapt a saying from the Watergate era, corruption 'follows the money' and highway department budgets (and corruption) skyrocketed to meet the demands for better roads by votes that were no longer content to be stuck in the mud – literally.

How bad is it in South Carolina today? This analysis from FitsNews.com run by controversial Republican blogger Will Folks: "This agency is an absolute disaster incompetent in its operations, corrupt to the core in its leadership and always pushing non-essential projects as it complains about its funding despite its base budget more than doubling over the last six years."

And, as if right on cue just to prove Folks' point, last week Attorney General Alan Wilson obtained five indictments for corruption against former DOT employees and their friends.

Now, Folks is not without his critics (us included on some other issues) and he is often guilty of overblown rhetoric but for years he has relentlessly and fearlessly chronicled the abuse at DOT and the politicians who have benefited. Make your own judgment – go to FitsNews.com and search 'DOT corruption' but you had better pack a lunch as it's going to take you a while to get through it all.

Setting aside all of the specific abuses that Folks chronicles, let's focus on the three big issues: the money, the roads and the reform efforts.

First the money. The S.C. Department of Transportation spends a lot of money – \$1.6 billion last year. And, despite recent tough economic times for the state, relatively speaking the DOT has continued to make out like a bandit. According to a recent story in *The State* newspaper entitled 'How S.C.'s Leaders Have Failed South Carolinians' (I strongly encourage you to Google the story and read it) over the last 10 years "Counting federal and state money the state Department of Transportation (spending) ... has increased to \$1.6 billion from \$1 billion, including a \$49.9 million increase in money from the state's general fund."

This amounts to a 63% increase for the DOT from the 2007-8 budget until today. At the same time, there were huge reductions in other departments: -27% for the Dept. of Health and Environmental Control, -25% for higher education, -24% in funds for local governments, -10% for K-12 funding, etc. Clearly the highway boys (and girls) have their friends in the legislature

who protect them.

Second, the roads. OK, we spend lots of money on roads but look what we get – great roads, right? Wrong – anyone who has driven in our state knows how bad the roads are.

Our roads are literally killing us – S.C. was tied with West Virginia as the state with the deadliest roads – according to last year's authoritative study by the National Transportation Research Group.

They also found that "throughout South Carolina, 46% of major roads and highways are in poor condition, a significant increase from 2008 when 32% of the state's major roads were rated in poor condition. 20% of South Carolina's bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete ... (this) costs each S.C. driver as much as \$1,250 per year ... or \$3 billion statewide."

The roads are so bad that a couple of years ago Pete Selleck, chairman and president of Greenville-based Michelin North America, said South Carolina's roads are in such bad shape the company might have to consider other locations for expansion. "The roads in this state are a disgrace," he said.

And all this was before last year's floods that left massive destruction of our state's roads and bridges.

So much for good roads and bridges.

Third, the reform. The question is are things going to change? The answer is maybe, possibly, a little, in time ... but don't count on it.

The road bill passed by the legislature this year supposedly had some significant reform provisions. Here's what Gov. Haley said of the so-called reforms, "A lot of elected officials went home and said, 'We got you roads. Rah rah!' You know, 'Re-elect us. We did a great thing.' And the truth of the matter is I think we stepped back a decade."

So much for reform.

But reform efforts continue. Just last week, Sen. Niki Setzler announced that this year's budget included a mandate to "fund a thorough study of the agencies' structure, regional offices, outsourcing and money spent by local county transportation committees."

Sounds great – but the chances are that after they spend a few hundred thousand dollars on this study, the lawmakers who share in the corruption of DOT will ensure that it goes on the shelf (or more likely in the trash can) with all the other studies.

We don't need more studies; we need more indictments.

More simple math: Corruption + Inaction = More Corruption + More Bad Roads + More Deaths

Phil Noble is a businessman in Charleston and President of the SC New Democrats, an independent reform group started by former Gov. Richard Riley to bring big change and real reform. phil@philnoble.com

Title: **Cemetery issue being investigated**
 Author: JONATHAN VICKERY Managing Editor jonathan.vickery@morris.com
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Cemetery issue being investigated

JONATHAN VICKERY

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The state's top law enforcement agency along with the Second Judicial Circuit's solicitor has been asked to look into complaints against the owner of two cemeteries in Barnwell and Bamberg counties.

Residents from both counties have complained about the condition of the perpetual care cemeteries for years, citing a lack of care and questions over finances. Fed up with a lack of action, several residents traveled to Columbia August 4 to speak before the S.C. Perpetual Care Cemetery Board.

Lack of care

"There is no standard of care. The conditions are absolutely deplorable. We are trying to make our loved ones rest in a place that's being treated with the dignity and respect they're owed," said Barnwell resident James Williams to the board. His father and great-grandparents are buried at Barnwell County Memory Gardens on Reynolds Road.

Williams along with Bamberg

County Councilman Trent Kinard, who has family buried at the Bamberg cemetery, have spearheaded a recent effort to bring about change at the cemeteries.

"If good people don't step up and do what is right, who will?" asked Kinard.

Jimmy Maximiek showed the board pictures of how the grave of his wife Charlene was left uncovered after her funeral with only a piece of plywood over it. He was told the backhoe was not working, which is why they could not immediately move dirt over the grave of his wife, who he was married to for more than 50 years.

Jon Steven Kent, who has owned the two cemeteries since 1993, had his license revoked in 2012 by the S.C. Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation. He was ordered by the S.C. Administrative Law Court to provide annual financial statements, hire an accountant to perform audits for previous years, pay thousands

from any accounts associated with the cemeteries, not do any new sales or contracts, and allow investigators to copy documents. Kent was found in contempt of a court order in 2014 and has yet to comply with the court's order, according to court documents.

Kinard showed the board a copy of a check a man wrote to Kent to purchase a plot at the Bamberg cemetery in May 2016. However, Kent, who was not at the meeting, is not supposed to be selling plots since his license was revoked four years ago.

Attempts to reach Kent were unsuccessful as of press time. *The People-Sentinel* left a message at the number listed for Bamberg County Memory Gardens.

Show me the money

While four years have passed since Kent's license was revoked, he has yet to provide any documents, according to court records.

"If he won't show me the mon-

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Cemetery: SLED, Solicitor's office requested to investigate claims against cemetery owner

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ey and won't show you the money, what does that say?" Kinard asked the board last week. "I don't know if the money is there or not."

Being perpetual care cemeteries means the owners are supposed to set aside a certain amount of funds into a perpetual care trust fund for the care and upkeep of the grounds.

"That fund assures the families that owning cemetery property, no matter whether I'm here or not,

the cemetery will be maintained forever," said Kent in an April 1993 article in *The People-Sentinel* announcing he and his wife Jerry had purchased the cemeteries from National Heritage Corporation.

However, that has not been the case as the grass is often tall, even covering some headstones. The mausoleum at the Bamberg cemetery has a leaky roof, stained carpet and other issues.

Kinard told the board how he witnessed an 83-year-

old widow at the Bamberg cemetery edging along her husband's grave in the heat. "That is a shame," he said.

Williams asked the board if they would permit him and other concerned citizens permission to regularly clean up the cemeteries on their own. While the board could not give them permission, a group of 12 people worked for three hours early Saturday morning, August 6 at the Barnwell cemetery.

Williams said Kent cut a

majority of the grass earlier this week after he and others voiced their concerns and made it known they were going to the state board. The group of volunteers edged around all headstones and sidewalks, cleaned grass clippings and other debris off headstones, trimmed hedges and cut grass at the entranceway, according to Williams. Someone also put an American flag back up on the flagpole.

Options

The board listened to



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the concerns of Williams, Kinard and others, but in the end they said they had "exhausted" their powers under state law.

However, Andrew Rogers, assistant deputy director with the S.C. Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation, said there is one option left available to local law enforcement relating to individuals in violation of state statutes. "They are aware of this," said Rogers, who spoke with local officials, including Second Circuit Solicitor Strom Thurmond Jr.

Thurmond confirmed to *The People-Sentinel* on August 9 that the LLR referred the case to his office to look into whether there are any "applicable criminal violations" that can be pursued. "The case is currently under review," said Thurmond.

After meeting with the board, the group of concerned citizens spoke with

John McIntosh, chief deputy attorney general at the S.C. Attorney General's Office. Williams said that office requested the State Law Enforcement Division (SLED) investigate the matter.

Pete Logan, who works for the investigative unit of SLED, called *The People-Sentinel* on August 9 on behalf of McIntosh. Logan said his agency is doing a "preliminary inquiry" at McIntosh's request into whether any funds were mishandled. He interviewed some of the concerned citizens last week but has yet to find any evidence of wrongdoing that they can pursue. He said the issues of Kent not maintaining the cemeter-

ies as well as selling plots without a license would be an LLR issue.

Williams said he plans to stay on top of this issue by reaching out to as many people as he can, including SLED Chief Mark Keel (a

Barnwell native), the S.C. Department of Consumer Affairs, Strom Thurmond, and local and state leaders. Kinard said he is going to reach out to Gov. Nikki Haley, who he grew up with in Bamberg.

While they understand the state board's powers are limited, Kinard said he hopes state lawmakers will step up to fix this issue, either by giving the board more authority or changing the laws.

"There needs to be strict punishment," said Williams. "This is a very, very specific problem that needs to be dealt with."

If Kent will not maintain the cemeteries as he should, Kinard and Williams said they would like to see someone else oversee it. Kinard said he discussed the matter with his fellow councilmen who are interested in taking over control of the Bamberg cemetery. Williams said he's not sure if Barnwell

County Council would be interested in taking over the local cemetery because he's only spoken with one member.

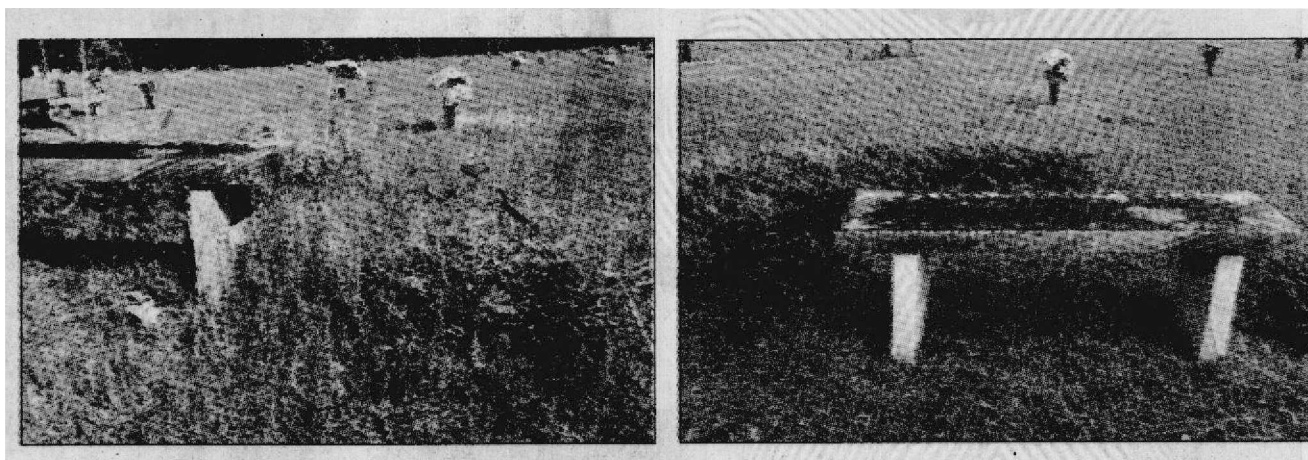
Brenda Richardson, speaking on behalf of the family of the late Dr. Gerald Stuart Paulk and Mary Helen Gibson Paulk, thanked Williams and Kinard for "boldly and articulately speaking" before the board. "You represented both counties well, were extremely informed and respectful but firmly made clear the need for positive change in both state mandates and proprietorship of said cemeteries. It also became clear that our perpetual care issues could be a statewide dilemma as well," she said.

A Facebook page has been created called "Friends and Family of Those Resting at Memory Gardens: www.facebook.com/groups/1777487025830796.

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This contributed photo shows tall grass by headstones and a bench prior to a cleanup event on August 6 at Barnwell Co. Memory Gardens.



The first photo shows a part of the Barnwell County Memory Gardens with tall grass and unkempt shrubs while the second photo shows the same area after an August 6 cleanup by volunteers who have loved ones buried there.

Title: **Automotive supplier launching in Duncan with 60 new jobs**
 Author: AMANDA COYNE THE GREENVILLE NEWS
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Automotive supplier launching in Duncan with 60 new jobs

Brose invests \$6M in its new facility that makes door systems

AMANDA COYNE
THE GREENVILLE NEWS

Automotive supplier Brose will add 60 jobs and invest \$6 million in a new Duncan facility.

The new facility will produce door systems and “systems for on-demand control of cooling air supply for its automotive customers,” according to a release from Gov. Nikki Haley’s office. Brose will occupy a 77,000-square-foot facility at 1171 Howell Road, moving from its current home of 10 offices in the Spartanburg Community College’s Center for Business and Entrepreneurial Development. The CBED is a “soft-landing facility” designed to help new economic development projects grow in Spartanburg County.

“Our automotive industry is truly one of the driving forces behind South Carolina’s economic growth, and we couldn’t be more excited to welcome Brose to our family,” Haley said in the release. “This nearly \$6 million investment, and the more than 60 jobs it means for Spartanburg County, will make a huge difference in the Upstate and is a reason to celebrate across the state.”

This will be Brose’s fourth facility in the United States. Hiring is underway. Applicants can visit brose.com/en/Career/.

Title: **SC faces \$10M in spending cuts**
 Author: SEANNA ADCOX ASSOCIATED PRESS
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SC faces \$10M in spending cuts

Airports, military museum hit hard

SEANNA ADCOX

ASSOCIATED PRESS

A revenue shortfall has cut \$10 million worth of spending from the state's \$7.5 billion budget, South Carolina's chief accountant said Wednesday, as he cautioned legislators to save more and spend less on "nice-to-have" items.

The surplus for the fiscal year that ended June 30 came in \$10.3 million less than the Legislature expected. By law, state Comptroller Richard Eckstrom must chop from the bottom of the budget's \$400-million-plus supplemental spending list.

The cuts hit the state's Aeronautics Commission the hardest; \$7 million was intended for maintenance and upgrades at the state's 51 publicly owned airports, which include six with commercial flights.

Agency director James Stephens said airports may miss out on federal grants that provide 90 percent of a project's costs — benefiting competing airports in other states — or local governments will have to come up with the full 10 percent match.

"If we don't take advantage, our neighboring competitor states will come up with a way to secure the funding," he said Wednesday. "More people are on the roads, but it's a huge economic benefit to all of our communities to have the airports open."

Other cuts to Aeronautics include \$100,000 to upgrade its security system and \$150,000 to help recruit a nonstop interna-

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Cuts

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tional flight to South Carolina. That effort requires market research, Rep. Jim Merrill, R-Charleston, said in June in successfully urging his colleagues to override Gov. Nikki Haley's veto of the item.

While Merrill didn't want to get specific, he said, "If we can get direct, nonstop flights to Europe from South Carolina, it's a game-changer to the state for business and tourism."

The \$1.1 million cut from the adjutant general's office includes \$380,000 to South Carolina's National Guard museum.

The last item on the list was \$100,000 to the treasurer's office for a new savings account program benefiting people with disabilities, created by law earlier this year.

This is the first time since

2012 that Eckstrom has had to cut anything. In the last three years, his year-end closings have revealed larger-than-expected surpluses.

Eckstrom said he's concerned about an economic downturn.

"I think we're going to see some real stress this upcoming year," he said, adding the state's existing reserves may not cover a plunge in revenue, depending on the severity.

The state's general reserve fund has \$328 million, but Eckstrom notes revenues dropped by more than \$1 billion amid the Great Recession.

He applauded the \$50 million at the top of the supplemental list for repairing roads. Other items at the top included \$37 million to reim-

burse the Department of Transportation for emergency repairs following last October's historic flooding.

Legislators need to focus more on such priorities, rather than funding "nice-to-have things," he said.

The list's varied spending includes money for school buses, college maintenance, parks, museums, a city bus, and restoring historical buildings.

Eckstrom pointed to the \$30 million allocated for replenishing sand along South Carolina's coast as an example of questionable spending.

While some say it's essential for tourism, "some say it's folly to fight Mother Nature," Eckstrom said. "I think it's probably more important to take care of the roads."

Legislators will resume their debate next year over how to fund tens of billions of dollars' worth of existing highway needs.

"I think we're going to see some real stress this upcoming year."

RICHARD ECKSTROM
STATE COMPTROLLER

Title: **Airports, military museum among losers in budget cut**
 Author: BY SEANNA ADCOX Associated Press
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SOUTH CAROLINA

Airports, military museum among losers in budget cut

BY SEANNA ADCOX

Associated Press
COLUMBIA

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The surplus for the fiscal year that ended June 30 came in \$10.3 million less than the Legislature expected. By law, state Comptroller Richard Eckstrom must chop from the bottom of the priority list for one-time spending.

"There are items on there that probably did not rise to the level of being high-priority spending items," Eckstrom said of the entire \$400-million-plus supplemental spending list.

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Title: **Mentally ill in jail to get help**
 Author: AMANDA COYNE THE GREENVILLE NEWS
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Mentally ill in jail to get help

County Council approves resolution

AMANDA COYNE

THE GREENVILLE NEWS

Greenville County Council unanimously approved a resolution aimed at reducing the number of mentally ill people in jails Tuesday night.

The resolution supports the Stepping Up Initiative, a movement also dedicated to addressing the issue of mental illness behind bars. Paton Blough, a Greenville resident and member of the Stepping Up Initiative, said the resolution will be a

tool to hold county council accountable for improvements in the county's law enforcement and mental healthcare policies.

Blough lives with a bipolar disorder and says previous actions, including instituting mental health courts, have helped him and other people with mental illnesses through the criminal justice system to get treatment.

"I've been in jail more than

half a dozen times and I've been in a mental hospital more than half a dozen times, but I was a lucky one. I went through what is called a mental health court. I was one of the lucky ones," Blough said. "If it wasn't for things like that, that people in this county kept going even when the funding ran out, I would be in jail or dead right

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Resolution

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now."

Blough cited a decline in South Carolina's number of beds in inpatient mental health treatment centers. The state currently has 493 beds in those centers, according to an Aug. 2 PBS report. The state has added 67 beds since Gov. Nikki Haley has been in office, but there were previously as many as 3,500 beds in mental health treatment facilities, Blough said.

The resolution pledges that Greenville County will:

» "Convene or draw on a diverse

team of leaders and decision makers from multiple agencies committed to safely reducing the number of people with mental illnesses in jails;

» Collect and review prevalence numbers and assess individuals' needs to better identify adults entering jails with mental illnesses and their recidivism risk, and use that baseline information to guide decision making at the system, program, and case levels;

» Examine treatment and service capacity to determine which programs and services are available in the county for people with mental

illnesses and cooccurring substance use disorders, and identify state and local policy and funding barriers to minimizing contact with the justice system and providing treatment and support in the community;

» Develop a plan with measurable outcomes that draws on the jail assessment and prevalence data and the examination of available treatment and service capacity, while considering identified barriers;

» Implement research-based approaches that advance the plan; and

» Create a process to track progress using data and information systems, and to report on successes."

Title: **Governor to attend ribbon-cutting ceremony Wednesday**
 Author: By GRAHAM WILLIAMS
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 Union, SC Circulation: 0



Governor to attend ribbon-cutting ceremony Wednesday

By GRAHAM WILLIAMS

Standing on a sawdust-covered floor, the Rev. Neil Keisler takes a break from his work to talk about "Meeting Place on Main," a place where people can go to get help finding a job.

"We're trying to clear away details that stand in the way of people trying to find gainful employment," he said.

Those details include education, training, transportation resources and contacts, said Keisler, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church.

Earlier this year, Keisler received a \$37,000 grant from The Original 6 Foundation to renovate the former McCall's Frame Shop and Gallery at 111 West Main St. The foundation was founded by Gov. Nikki Haley as a resource to "build bridges for a better quality of life for the residents of the communities we serve."

Haley will be in town Wednesday morning at 11 for the ribbon cutting ceremony.

The renovations include a new back deck, two new

See MEETING PLACE, Page 2

