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ROAD MAINTENANCE VITAL TO SUSTAINABLE SERVICE DELIVERY

The approval by the Cabinet in 2006 of the National Infrastructure Maintenance Strategy (NIMS) has ratified the long-held stance of the roads industry: “The maintenance of South Africa’s road network at all levels of government is an obligation, not a choice”.

“The Southern African Bitumen Association (Sabita) has long held the view, and has spelled this view out at numerous occasions for local government councilors, that deferred maintenance of roads is false economy which inevitably leads to significantly increased expenditure to replace infrastructural assets that have been allowed to deteriorate beyond the point of repair,” Trevor Distin, CEO of Sabita, said this week.

The NIMS makes it clear that the “delivery of infrastructure” does not end with the commissioning of an infrastructural asset, but demands that plans be formulated and budgets allocated, at the time of commissioning, to ensure that funds and appropriately skilled human resources, are available to operate and maintain the asset throughout its design life.

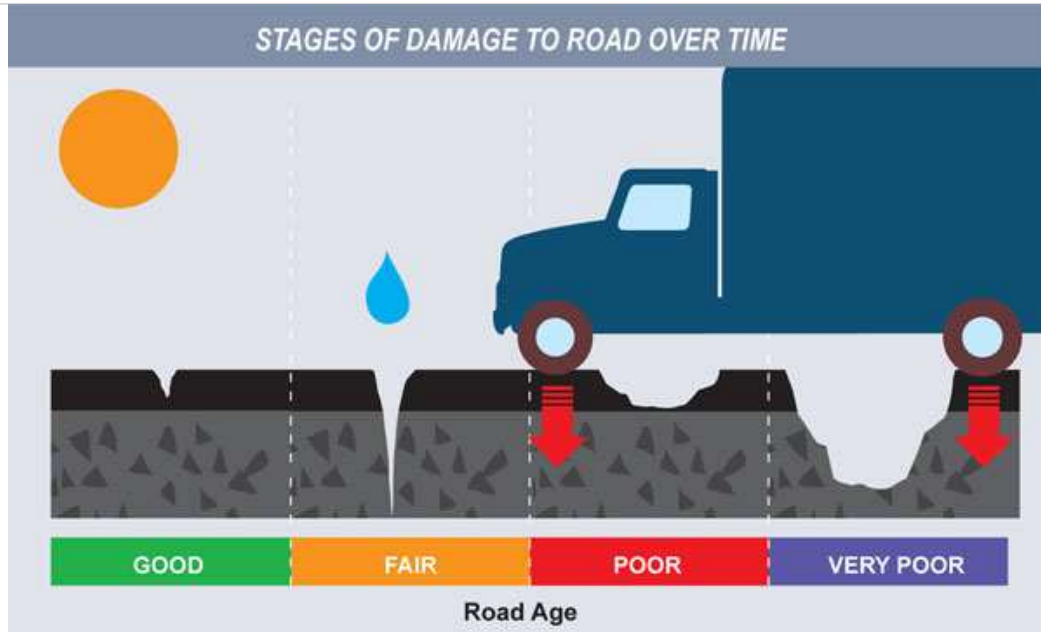
It is important to note that the National Treasury has made it clear that no additional funding will be made available for the implementation of the NIMS. The Minister of Finance has said his department’s attitude is that many public sector institutions have, in the past, been unable to spend their budgets, and should therefore have little difficulty in reallocating capital funding to maintenance projects.

“The delivery and commissioning of an asset such as a newly constructed highway is a ‘sexy’ activity that is seen to generate positive political capital for the government body providing that asset,” Distin said. “Maintenance, on the other hand, does not have the same impact and is consequently often neglected – often when there are adequate funds available that are simply not being spent. While this may be due to the lack of appropriate internal resources and skills, these can easily be sourced from the private sector.”

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The lack of maintenance will accelerate the deterioration of a road over time. He pointed out that the rehabilitation of a road allowed to deteriorate to “poor” condition will cost six times more than the cost of regular maintenance, and reconstruction of a road in “very poor” condition will cost 18 times more than regular, routine maintenance.

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Types of maintenance during the road's life

	Type of maintenance	Action
Road Condition	Good	Routine: Ongoing each year Clean/repair drainage Seal surface cracks Repair surface failures
	Fair	Periodic: Between 8 to 15 years Resurfacing with: slurry seals, chip & spray or asphalt
	Poor	Reactive: After 15 years Rehabilitate road by: filling potholes, patching and insitu recycling

Different types of activities which are needed to maintain a surfaced road during its life

The NIMS seeks to entrench a systematic and sustainable climate of regular and timely maintenance, and its action plan focuses on four main thrusts aimed at:

- strengthening the regulatory framework governing planning and budgeting for infrastructure maintenance;
- assisting institutions with non-financial resources;
- developing the maintenance industry; and
- strengthening the process of monitoring, evaluation and reporting, and feeding this into a process of continuous improvement.

“The above makes it clear that all three tiers of government have a legal responsibility to develop plans for the maintenance of infrastructure, particularly roads given their vital role in human mobility and economic development, at the same time as they plan the asset itself,” Distin said. “These plans must include the provision and allocation of funding, and ensuring that skills and expertise are available to implement the plans. It has become clear in recent years that human capacity is often lacking, particularly at local government level, but this should not present any impediment to the implementation of the NIMS because the private sector is willing and able to assist, and it has been proven that outsourcing skills needs is more cost-effective than deferring maintenance because of deficiencies in in-house know-how.”

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He added that the private sector was able to offer both effective Pavement Management Systems (PMSs) and the expertise to assist local governments to assess and prioritise maintenance needs.

“The PMS is a vital tool for ensuring that road condition is properly evaluated and monitored, that maintenance priorities are established, and that resources are allocated in the most efficient and cost effective manner,” Distin said. “However, on its own a PMS is not going to solve the maintenance problems of local governments, and it is of vital importance that these bodies create and implement a strategy to ensure that budgets are spent, and that maintenance activities are designed for optimum resource utilisation..” He added that maintenance was an activity that often required labour intensive construction methods, and was thus a valuable method of creating sustainable employment and enterprise development. The NIMS specifically refers to this in its action plan for building and developing the maintenance sector by “developing models, guidelines and procedures for the procurement of maintenance services, particularly ongoing long-term maintenance contracts that will promote SMME development, involvement of women, local employment etc. to build capacity in the industry. The government’s Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) is expected to play vital role in this process.

“In March this year Sabita’s Award for Outstanding Achievement was presented to Mpumalanga businesswoman and contractor Violet Mphafudi, managing director of Vioflo Services (Pty) Ltd.,” Distin said. “Violet was cited for her sterling employment of labour-enhanced construction methods in upgrading approximately 40 kms of gravel roads to surfaced standard in Hammanskraal and surrounding townships. This proves not only that South Africa has the capacity to embrace a culture of sustainable maintenance in the roads sector, but also that much of this work can be successfully undertaken by women.

“We should also remember that the regular maintenance of roads can lead to improved service delivery and will help extend infrastructure to historically disadvantaged communities and support the nation’s economy. ‘Deliver’ needs to be understood as embracing not just the construction of infrastructure but the operation and maintenance of that infrastructure throughout its intended life. The development of a sustained and methodical maintenance strategy can lead to improved road conditions which will have spin-off benefits in the form of better mobility for the population, improved access to hospitals, schools and other infrastructure, the emergence of new economic nodes, and lower vehicle operating costs,” he said.

The Government Immovable Asset Management Act (GIAMA) makes it obligatory for municipalities to draw up sound multiyear infrastructure asset management plans.

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Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA) places maintenance high on the development agenda as a key to sustainable development and economic growth.