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billion over the next 10 years to repair S.C. roads, state Department of Transportation Secretary Robert St. Onge said what a lot of people were thinking.

Jun. 25, 2013

After Gov. Nikki Haley signed into law Monday a bill pledging to spend close to \$1 billion over the next 10 years to repair S.C. roads, state Department of Transportation Secretary Robert St. Onge said what a lot of people were thinking.

“You can count on the fact that it’s not enough,” he said.

Transportation officials say the state needs \$29 billion in new spending over the next 20 years to meet its road maintenance needs. The bill Haley signed into law, which includes spending half of the state’s income from auto sales taxes on road repairs, would generate close to \$1 billion in new spending.

But Haley, the first-term Republican governor getting ready to launch her re-election campaign, said the news is not what South Carolina does not have but what it does have.

“What you saw today is a commitment to infrastructure. That’s something we haven’t seen in years,” Haley said. “Let’s celebrate that. Why can’t we just be happy?”

The new spending on roads was a key part of a budget compromise that lawmakers approved last week. Haley declined to say Monday if she would veto the other part of that compromise: an expansion of the state’s 4-year-old kindergarten program for low-income students, pushed by her chief political rival, state Sen. Vincent Sheheen, D-Kershaw.

Haley has until midnight Tuesday to issue vetoes. “To be continued, as Mark Sanford always said,” she said Monday.

The bill Haley signed into law, accompanied by other provisions in the state's \$22.7

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bridges — money the Transportation Department can use to accept up to \$250 million in federal money.

Many had wondered if Haley would veto the road spending because it borrowed money to pay for road repairs, something Haley had resisted earlier in the legislative session. But in signing the bill Monday, Haley reserved a pen for state Senate Minority Leader Nikki Setzler, D-Lexington, the first lawmaker to file a bill proposing the state borrow \$500 million to pay for roads.

Setzler pointed out the state was scheduled to finish paying off a \$750 million loan in 2015, freeing up about \$70 million a year in the state's budget to pay for other things. Haley echoed Setzler's argument Monday and thanked him for his work on the bill, saying, "Had we not had the bond bill coming off in 2015 ... it would be very different."

"I'm extremely pleased; I think it's a major step in the right direction," Setzler said. "Our roads are in such terrible shape, and we are so far behind. This won't come anywhere close to solving the problem, but it will certainly make a dent in the problem."

Haley signed the bill over the objections of some in her own party, who wanted Haley to veto the borrowing.

"You include Boeing, this year we have borrowed \$720 million and heaped it onto future generations," said state Sen. Kevin Bryant, R-Anderson. "I just don't understand where the outrage is. ... Nobody in Columbia seems to be interested in reining in this fiscal insanity."

The increased spending comes less than a year after transportation officials estimated South Carolina will have \$48.3 billion in road repair needs over the next 20 years, but only \$19 billion to pay for those repairs — leaving a \$29 billion deficit.

That prompted business groups, including the S.C. Chamber of Commerce, to lobby

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