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## Beleaguered DOT reorganizes

### Agency seeks to soothe critics, gain efficiency

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A reorganization aimed at making the Department of Transportation more businesslike, transparent and accountable -- and more acceptable to its critics in the General Assembly -- was announced Thursday by State Transportation Secretary Lyndo Tippet.

"We think the product we deliver will be done more efficiently in the future with the changes we are making," Tippet said. "We have to prioritize our limited revenue stream, which is declining."

Dan DeVane, Tippet's chief deputy secretary, will take on more authority as chief operating officer, overseeing the Highway Division and other DOT operations. A newly created inspector general -- a position yet to be filled -- is expected to strengthen the DOT's internal auditing and performance monitoring.

A new organizational chart incorporates other changes the DOT has adopted during 18 months of self-examination.

Legislative leaders have pushed for reforms, saying they lost faith in Tippet's department after lapses that included a botched widening project on Interstate 40 in Durham County. A 10-mile stretch of concrete pavement was ruined because of lapses in design and poor construction oversight, and the DOT spent \$21.6 million to replace it with asphalt.

The DOT paid a consulting company, McKinsey & Co., \$3.6 million for its help in modernizing the department and its 14,000 employees.

Legislators welcomed the DOT's effort to streamline its bureaucracy Thursday and said they would watch for more tangible results.

"Things won't change overnight because of this, but this looks good to me," said state Rep. Nelson Cole, a Reidsville Democrat and co-chairman of the legislature's transportation oversight committee.

State Rep. Paul Stam of Apex, the House Republican leader, said he hoped the DOT was on the road to improvement.

"You can't fix a department by moving the boxes around," Stam said. "But I do like having a professional chief operating officer -- which will make the secretary more like a board chairman than like a company president."

Stam said Gov. Mike Easley and the legislature have let transportation funding decline in recent years.

"The basic problem is the governor's office," Stam said. "Until you have a governor that pays attention to transportation, you're not going to fix what's wrong at DOT."

To speed the pace and cut the cost of replacing old highway bridges across the state, the department said last week that it had overhauled its bridge management program. The DOT

replaces 100 old bridges each year but needs to quadruple that pace to keep up with a growing backlog.

With a new approach, DOT officials hope to get new bridges designed and built in three years instead of five.

"We've determined we can use something like a standard design for many of the rural bridges and save 8 to 12 percent on each project," Tippet said. "That's \$80,000 to \$120,000 apiece -- and if you do that 100 times during the year, you get some serious money."

Another new position gives more prominence to strategic planning. The 14 highway divisions that cover the state map will be rechristened transportation divisions, to provide a broader local focus that includes transit, rail, aviation, bicycle and pedestrian projects.

State Sen. Phil Berger of Eden, the Senate Republican leader, said he'll be watching for results.

"I'm interested in seeing the follow-through," Berger said. "We've got a lot of other things that need to be done in transportation."

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