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The S'hamba Sonke (walking together) project, a massive pothole-patching programme involving locals who will be recruited to repair damaged secondary, district and municipal roads, is expected to create 70 000 jobs.

Transport Minister S'bu Ndebele told journalists in Cape Town that R6.2bn had been set aside for the project this year, another R7.5bn for the next financial year and R8.2bn in 2013-14.

He said South Africa was moving towards striking a balance between road construction and maintenance where the international benchmark is 40% construction and 60% maintenance.

Ndebele said road engineers would be deployed all over the road network and would be tasked with driving up and down stretches of road to identify damaged ones and repair potholes before they expand to large ditches.

A pothole hotline will also be launched to allow road-users to report potholes on their routes.

"S'hamba Sonke will no doubt arrest the decline of our infrastructure and create thousands of jobs," he said.

Ndebele said the government was battling to finance the R497bn road construction backlog and was considering public-private partnership models as well as a user pay principle, which would see toll road schemes such as the one that will be in operation on the freeways between Pretoria and Johannesburg in June expanded all over the country.

Meanwhile, the government is planning to buy more than 8 000 passenger train coaches to replace its ageing fleet in the next 18 months. The ambitious R80bn project would result in the introduction of modern, faster trains transporting large volumes of commuters.

According to Ndebele South Africa needs up to R468bn to address the investment needs of the roads and rail sector, R75bn for road maintenance, R93bn for commuter rail services and R260bn to R300bn for the struggling Shosholoza Meyl.

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