

Need for Balance Between Mobility, Cost and Impact

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A few years back, the Sunday New York Times had a telling picture that accompanied a story about the challenges faced by a number of Third World countries. The photo showed frustrated drivers standing atop their trucks that were stranded deep above their tires in mud. Without mobility, a nation has little chance of competing.

Though we are blessed with the world's highest mobility standards and a matching level of economic prosperity, our nation and commonwealth are not without challenges as we manage transportation.

In Washington, Congress and the President are well into a second year without agreement on a new six-year transportation spending blueprint. Congress recently settled for another eight-month temporary funding extension. Left unresolved are thorny and pressing issues about how federal money will be allocated among the states and whether public transit, intercity passenger rail and rail freight are going to gain a place in a truly balanced transportation agenda.

One immediate impact of the national transportation myopia is the impending loss of the Three Rivers passenger train between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg. The

Three Rivers and its sister train the Pennsylvanian had growing ridership. But as financially hard-pressed as Amtrak is, it had no choice but to start cutting, and this fabled passenger rail corridor — once home to the Broadway Limited — again faces loss of service.

Looking to our own situation, we find that Pennsylvania will be roughly \$6 billion short of meeting all highway and bridge needs over the next six years. We have a big (40,000 miles of highways; 25,000 bridges), old, state maintained system and unrelenting customer expectations that those pavements will be smooth and the structures up to date.

A coalition of interests representing the construction industry and public transit are pushing the Governor and Legislature for more revenue. But with fuel prices at \$2 a gallon and likely to stay there or go higher, it is going to be very tough to ask people to dig deeper for transportation.

Our role at PennDOT is to do the very best we can with available resources. From his first day in office, Gov. Edward G. Rendell relentlessly has ordered all of us in his Cabinet to slash expenses and improve value for taxpayers. At

PennDOT, we have cut millions from overhead expenses and are implementing detailed programs to squeeze more efficiencies from our maintenance operations and retool the project delivery process.

Revitalizing Pennsylvania's cities and boroughs is high on Governor Rendell's agenda and transportation decisions loom large in that picture. We are at a point where we simply can't offer up the four-lane, limited access bypass as the preferred solution for our mobility issues. We can't afford it financially or physically. Instead, we are looking to "right size projects;" that is to find the balance between improved mobility, reasonable cost and favorable environmental and neighborhood impact. Three projects in southeastern Pennsylvania are going through such a review

now. And we are working with Metropolitan Planning and Rural Planning Organizations to agree on such an approach for future updates to our Transportation Improvement Plans. We must also think harder about how we integrate transportation with the shape of our living spaces and reverse the trends that threaten our core communities, suburbs and rural townships.

We in this nation and Commonwealth are blessed that we don't face the daunting daily challenges of getting to market, job or home as represented in that photo in the Sunday Times. Still, we have tough decisions ahead. I am confident that at least we are weighing our options and, working together, we will make reasonable choices to keep all segments of our society mobile and prosperous.

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