

Effect of Transportation Improvements to the Airport Corridor

By Dwight Schock

Assistant Vice President-Transit, Michael Baker Jr., Inc.

Improvements to Pittsburgh's Parkway West, long discussed and at last under way, may be creating some slowdowns today, but will have important long-term economic benefits for the Airport Corridor.

Many more proposals exist to improve the transportation corridor from Downtown to the Pittsburgh International Airport and to address clearly identified needs that motorists can see and use right now. But locating and securing the necessary funding has proven to be a significant stumbling block. The Moon Township-based, engineering and professional services company, Michael Baker Jr., Inc. (Baker) has long been involved with Airport Corridor projects and has provided a report on the effects of transportation improvements to this vital link between Pittsburgh and the rest of the world.

The comprehensive report, developed for Port Authority of Allegheny County, PENNDOT, the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, Allegheny County, and the City of Pittsburgh, titled, "Airport Multimodal Transportation Improvements: An Opportunity for Southwestern Pennsylvania," details exactly what is at stake should the transportation system in the air-

port corridor remain as is.

"The fact is that the Parkway West fares poorly when compared with modern transportation systems in the regions around the world that compete with Southwestern Pennsylvania for jobs," states the report. "The Parkway West is fifty years old, constrained by undersized tunnels and in some cases partial interchanges, experiences higher than statewide average accident rates, and is vastly overburdened by traffic.

"The current queue typically ends near Green Tree," the report continues. "By 2025, the back up will extend from the Fort Pitt Tunnels to I-79, never easing to Green Tree during the entire work day."

A task force comprising Port Authority of Allegheny County, Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, PENNDOT, Allegheny County, the Allegheny County Airport Authority, and the City of Pittsburgh—led the study, which affirmed, "With the implementation of proposed improvements, the Parkway West will become a catalyst for growth and development in the region, rather than the obstacle it is today." Community and business leaders, as well as the public, provided specific input as the report took shape.



The proposed improvements were grouped into two main areas — Parkway West Widening/Bus Rapid Transit, and Airport Connector Light Rail Project.

Under the Parkway West Widening/Bus Rapid Transit category, specific recommended improvements include:

- Parkway West widening by one lane in each direction.
- Interchange improvements from the Fort Pitt Tunnels to Beaver County.
- Designation of the Parkway West as Interstate 376.
- Improvements to the "core area" between the Banksville Road interchange and Downtown Pittsburgh, which may include two new two-lane tunnels, adjacent to the existing Fort Pitt Tunnels, as well as interchange improvements at both ends of the tunnels.
- Bus Rapid Transit expansion to the current West Busway.
- Transportation system enhancements including roadway, trail, safety, Intelligent Transportation Systems and access improvements to further facilitate move-

ment throughout the corridor.

Under the Airport Connector Light Rail Project category, specific recommended improvements include:

- Light rapid rail transit link between Downtown Pittsburgh and the airport.
- Linkage of the Downtown Subway, North Shore and South Hills LRT via the North Shore Connector currently under design.
- Improved transit service for local communities via reliable and frequent transportation to jobs, residences and commercial activity centers for the City of Pittsburgh, McKees Rocks, and the townships of Stowe, Kennedy, Robinson, Rosslyn Farms, Moon and Findlay.
- Transit-oriented land use enhancements in those communities.
- Opportunity to connect to Oakland and other corridors.

It's quite an ambitious set of plans, but the potential for economic benefit is every bit as ambitious.

"People have thought for years that we really need to do something along this corridor, but once it gets



Effect of Transportation Improvements to the Airport Corridor Continued

started it can never get done fast enough,” said Sally Haas, president of the Airport Area Chamber of Commerce. “So many years of waiting; hopefully, this is going to make the kind of improvements and the kind of economic difference we all want.”

Among the possible improvements identified for the Parkway by the Study and its sponsors, are several projects that have either been started or are planned, including building missing ramps to connect the Parkway West to I-79, improvements to the Settlers Cabin and Campbell Run Road interchanges, and connection to the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission’s Southern Beltway.

As Baker worked with the task force, the question wasn’t about building a new highway, but how to improve transportation to make the region more economically viable. The goal was to facilitate movement throughout the region,

particularly between Downtown and the airport.

Baker and the task force determined that the economics of the situation dictated that widening the Parkway West made the most sense, because it not only connects Pittsburgh’s Downtown and the airport, but the Parkway is also the lifeline for business along the corridor that connects to the rest of the region — Monroeville, the university community in Oakland, the Mon Valley and more. The bottom-line realization was that when the Parkway West is working well, all parts of our region benefit.

The report backs up that assertion, stating that development and redevelopment projects affecting thousands of jobs may be reduced or eliminated without making the necessary improvements to the airport corridor. Dozens of future developments and redevelopment plans in Beaver, Allegheny, Washington and Westmoreland counties

rely on Parkway improvements, including university and hospital development in Oakland, redevelopment of the former LTV sites in Hazelwood and Aliquippa, development of the Intermodal Transport Center at Sony near New Stanton, and thousands of units of new residential development.

The lack of efficient transportation from the airport — whether by private vehicle or public transit — remains the single greatest obstacle to the economic gains this region has in its sights, according to the report. With some of the initial projects now under way, hope remains strong that the tide will begin to turn in favor of local business and economic development.

One of the report’s recommendations would require virtually no — or very little — public funding, yet could make tremendous inroads in attracting new investment to the area. This is the simple designation of the entire length of the Parkway

West as a federal Interstate highway.

“Getting a redesignation as an Interstate would be wonderful,” said Haas. “Around here we all call it the Parkway West, but think about it — there is not one sign anywhere on that road that reads ‘Parkway.’ People coming in from out of town don’t know what we’re talking about.

“But beyond being able to give better directions to visitors, getting an Interstate designation could encourage and attract more development, because developers want to invest and build close to Interstate highways,” she said.

“The Parkway West is a backbone of transportation for this entire region,” said Haas. “It carries the main load. Our need for better transportation infrastructure and connectivity is driving these efforts, because the corridor remains closely tied to and is critical for the success of our community.”



Michael G. Bock, a 1991 graduate of the Duquesne School of Law Evening Division is a partner and construction law practitioner with Schnader Harrison Segal & Lewis, LLP. He is a registered Professional Engineer and currently the 1st Vice President with the Engineers’ Society of Western Pennsylvania (ESWP).

Michael G. Bock, P.E., Esquire...

...on the Combination of Engineering and Law:

“Throughout my prior career in engineering and construction, I was often involved with attorneys... usually with respect to contract negotiations or with respect to pursuit or defense of a construction claim. From those experiences, it appeared clear to me that an attorney with hands-on experience and substantive knowledge in engineering and construction areas could be especially effective and would have a real advantage in practicing construction industry law.”

...on the Duquesne University School of Law Evening Division:

“With my J.D. degree in hand from Duquesne Law School’s Evening division, I’ve been practicing construction law for approximately twelve years. I typically represent contractors, owners, design professionals and surety companies. I believe my clients appreciate the fact that I’ve ‘been there’ and can identify with their legal problems based on firsthand experience. This makes for a very effective and enjoyable working relationship. Also, I’ve found my legal skills, combined with my background in engineering and construction, to be a very marketable ‘package’ to construction industry clients.”

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