

Regional Transportation: A Legacy of Adaptability and Renewal



The challenge of refurbishing the Fort Pitt Bridge and Tunnel

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The legacy of transportation in Western Pennsylvania is one of adaptability — both by necessity, and by design. From the earliest days of European exploration, this region has been a key strategic hub for movement of people and goods from east to west.

Before St. Louis took the moniker, Pittsburgh had been known as the original “Gateway to the West.” Today locals are reminded of that designation through facilities such as Gateway Center, in downtown Pittsburgh, near the confluence of the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio rivers, where explorers including Lewis and Clark, first set off on their westward adventures.

Pittsburgh has played an inte-

gral part of our national transportation history. First, as wagons arrived from Philadelphia, then as the rivers were used to move people and goods to ports in Cincinnati, St. Louis, and eventually joining the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico and the ocean. In time, highways and railroads were devel-

“Now, 65 to 70 percent of passengers are coming for origination and destination purposes. People need to get to the airport — they’re not driving anywhere else.”

oped to support the import and export needs of Pittsburgh’s industrial powerhouses — steel, coal, coke,

glass and many others.

But as the mills multiplied along the river valleys, the growing workforce began putting down roots along the surrounding hills. Phenomenal growth in population, especially around the turn of the 20th century, made getting around the city increasingly difficult. An

early problem was getting across the rivers, leading to a boom in bridge construction.

No discussion of regional transportation would be complete without a reference to bridges. Other than Venice, Italy, no other city in the world has as many bridges as Pittsburgh. As cited in the book “Pittsburgh Bridges” by Walter C. Kidney, it reads in part, “Without bridges, the Pittsburgh region would be a series of fragmented valleys, hillsides, river plains,

and isolated communities. With them, we come together to form a mighty unity. Some 1,600 bridges bind our city and county together, making places accessible that otherwise would not be accessible and resulting, in many cases, in ingenious engineering structures full of color and drama.”

While bridges may be the most dramatic example of adaptability in building the region’s transportation legacy, they are certainly not the only examples. The changing needs of local industry and workers influenced the transportation systems greatly, as have changing capabilities and technologies supporting those transportation options.

Adaptability Marks Recent Transportation History, Too

In much the same way, the recent history of transportation in the region encompasses some notable advancements and successes, along with some areas that continue to warrant further attention, but all grounded in the call for and demand of adaptability. For example, the important interconnectivity of surface and air transportation — a seeming dichotomy that in reality makes perfect sense.

“It is imperative that we have good highway access to the airport,” said Kent George, executive director of the Allegheny County



The 100-gate Midfield Terminal facility at Pittsburgh International Airport

Regional Transportation: A Legacy of Adaptability and Renewal continued



Mon/Fayette Expressway,
I-70 to PA-51 Project

Airport Authority. “Overall, we’re in very good shape, with the Airport Expressway and I-376 from the Pennsylvania Turnpike. The reason our ground access is so good is that it’s clear, easy and accessible.

“Improvements to the roads around the airport are imperative today because the airport has changed,” he said. “Before the US Air bankruptcy, we were a connecting airport with 70 percent of passengers moving from one plane to another within the airport. Now, 65 to 70 percent of passengers are coming for origination and destination purposes. People need to get to the airport — they’re not driving anywhere else.

“The influx of Southwest Airlines and other low-cost carriers has expanded our customer base to 5 million people living or working within a 90-minute drive of the airport,” George added. “The better highway structure we have, the more it reduces the chances of those passengers driving to other airports.”

Back on the ground, transportation in Pittsburgh has been influenced by conditions that mirror national trends, adding to the ongoing need for adaptability.

“We have seen a change in the behavior and composition of working households,” explained Chuck

DiPietro, transportation planning director of the Southwest PA Conference. “There’s a second worker in households today. There’s a propensity to do a lot more travel, and

Pittsburgh begins with a one-of-a-kind physical presence, but its place in the larger picture makes its transportation issues worth the effort to address.

“The Mon Valley Expressway is a very important transportation project because it touches down at five different brownfield sites — sites that are critical to economic development in those communities,”

most of us travel to work. Everyone’s busier now, including recreation. Everything’s a trip. The number of trips per household has exploded. Pittsburgh has had a fairly stable population, but that same number of people is taking more trips, driving more cars than in the past. We’ve become much more mobile.

“One of the things we have to remember in thinking about transportation in this region is maintaining and preserving what we’ve got before moving into new areas,” he said. “Relieving congestion and increasing access makes our economic competitiveness better. Rather than start from scratch, if you can use what’s in place, that’s better.”

“It may cost more to transport goods because of our topography, but 65 percent of the U.S. population lives in the Northeast, the larg-

est pool anywhere in the nation,” said Barbara McNees, executive director of the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce. “Why do Sony, FedEx Ground, UPS and others have major operations here? Because we’re in the heart of where customers are. But we need to take advantage of the existing infrastructure.”

The need to improve the existing infrastructure resulted in one of the region’s most comprehensive, most daunting, and most unavoidable projects in history — the Fort Pitt Bridge and Tunnel refurbishing — an event that affected virtually every motorist in every part of Southwestern Pennsylvania in one way or another. It brought the absolute essence of good transportation systems here into stark relief — while also proving that when divergent parties in the region share a common transportation-related goal, nothing is impossible.

“That project took ten years of preparation,” recalled DiPietro. “When it was under construction we had alternates ready, permanent improvements that many people later said were even better than the repaired bridge and tunnels. It meant packaging a variety of projects to make the big project go smoothly.

“At the beginning, the feeling was that we can’t close that bridge, gridlock will result,” he said. “But



Design rendering of the I-79 Missing Ramp

the plan got put together. We had to sink some dollars into it before it happened, and we needed to include everybody, all stakeholders. But in the end it worked so well that you can take that model today and apply it to any project anywhere.”

“The Fort Pitt project took a lot of work,” added McNeese. “We put everybody we could in a room who would be touched by the project, and mapped out what we were going to do. At the end of the day, the 16th St. Bridge project was delayed, the Liberty Tunnel interchange was upgraded sooner, we had worked out the alternate routes, and agreed to turn off the traffic signals. We were able to work out a schedule so that it all worked. We put up a website and started ‘Coneman,’ the superhero mascot for the project.

“The professional sports teams, the Cultural District, the business community — they all communicated with their audiences to make

sure people knew what was going to happen and how they could still get around,” McNeese said. “We looked at other cities and came up with the plan that we thought would work for Pittsburgh.

“The other great thing about the Fort Pitt project was when the Riverlife Task Force stopped the original plans to install concrete barriers on the bridge,” she said. “They made it clear that we have a great ‘front door’ and that the community said that concrete barriers to block that view was just not acceptable.”

McNeese’s involvement in the Fort Pitt project gives her a special perspective on the interrelationship between area business interests and the transportation system.

“When you look at the geography of Pittsburgh, you’re already challenged in terms of transportation,” she said. “That’s why the business community has been very active in trying to assert itself into

deciding what the transportation priorities should be. The missing ramps from I-79 to the Parkway West was unacceptable, for instance. The business community is getting more involved so that this region can be more competitive. The Findlay connector to the airport and the Cranberry connector between I-79, Route 19, and the Turnpike were two results of that involvement.”

Some of the most successful new developments in the region actually owe their existence to Pittsburgh’s industrial legacy. But the transportation systems that served the steel mills so well don’t necessarily meet the needs of today’s retail, commercial, and residential developments springing to life on those very sites. Once more, adaptability is the watchword.

“There’s a pattern now of new development of brownfields like the Waterfront, where the land is reused, but transportation around

it hasn’t been upgraded,” acknowledged DiPietro. “Transportation improvements are needed there to keep up the quality of life. It’s cost-effective to coordinate transportation and economic development, because that site is so perfectly tied to established population centers like Homestead, Squirrel Hill, and the South Hills.”

“It’s a good problem to have,” noted McNeese. “I’d much rather have the problem of finding money to fix transportation systems than worry whether a site will ever be developed again.”

“The Mon Valley Expressway is a very important transportation project because it touches down at five different brownfield sites — sites that are critical to economic development in those communities,” said Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato. “These are attractive properties that need to be developed.”



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“Light rail would stop at all locations, and offer park-and-ride, too. That kind of connection would get 10,000 cars off that highway every day.”



Artist rendering of the proposed MAGLEV station in downtown Pittsburgh

Looking Ahead, More Adaptability Will Be Required

All in all, the call for adaptability to make improvements in transportation across Western Pennsylvania remains as strong and as central to success as ever. When looking ahead, the same idea applies and perhaps in even stronger terms.

“Every year my office puts together an Allegheny County eco-

nomics development book for the governor and our Congressional delegation,” Onorato said. “We build consensus here, then it’s my job as the leading political office holder here to push it in Harrisburg and Washington. Through this process, for example, we were able to get a million dollars in federal funding through the transportation bill for a study of light rail link between Downtown and Oak-

land along Second Avenue.”

“The region has had to come together, and it has — which is really saying something,” said McNees. “Ten counties and Pittsburgh need to reach consensus and say here’s what’s needed, prioritize projects and speak as one voice. Legislators understand and appreciate the progress being made here in establishing a process of regional development.

“When every municipality and every economic development group went out on its own, it was never enough to get the jobs done completely or well,” she noted. “The Southwest PA Commission came to us last year and pointed out that we were really not getting our fair share of PennDOT dollars here. We saw the potential for projects and started a concerted letter-writing campaign. Now we have seen a 60 percent increase in that funding stream.”

“Our first priority for the future is to take care of the decaying infrastructure, the interstate highways, bridges, bottlenecks like Route 28,” echoed DiPietro. “We’re not going to be able to build a new system of roadways here. We will be able to upgrade some, with very limited expansion.”

“The Pittsburgh International Airport has been ranked by Conde Nast the No. 1 airport in the U.S., and No. 3 in the world,” said George of the Airport Authority. “JD Power ranking places us always in the top five. Surface trans-

portation in and out of airport factors into those rankings. But as good as we are, a rail connection to Downtown is still missing.

“Maglev may be a very good option over the long haul, but doesn’t really meet the needs of the airport today,” he said. “Someday we can get on Maglev and go to Downtown and Monroeville, but what’s really needed is to connect the airport with Robinson Town Centre, Carnegie, Greentree, Downtown, Oakland. Getting the airport and Oakland better connected in particular is extremely important. Light rail would stop at all locations, and offer park-and-ride, too. That kind of connection would get 10,000 cars off that highway every day.”

“Connecting the airport to Downtown to Oakland — everybody wants to see this happen sooner rather than later,” McNees confirmed. “These are the types of issues that our business community members care about. The transportation system is always posing challenges.”

So, in the end, it comes to the need to move people and goods to and from the places where innovation and production can be found. Thanks to the natural beauty of the region — and the simultaneously challenging and advantageous topography enjoyed here — transportation systems here continue to adhere to the centuries-old winning formula of adaptability as the key to progress.

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