

Pennsylvania Looks to Highlight an Important 'Utility Bill'—Transportation

by Barry J. Schoch, Pennsylvania Department of Transportation



Every day, Americans pay for the ability to call a family member across the country, watch their choice of hundreds of television channels, and keep running water and electricity in their homes. These are bills people are used to—a payment for accessibility to services. In Pennsylvania, I would like citizens to look at their transportation system in the same way.

We need to look at our transportation network investment like a utility bill. You may never drive to Kansas or even to the other side of the state, but funding is required to keep the system intact so people always have that option.

Mailing Pennsylvanians bills isn't an option for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT); legislation and procedural changes are needed to increase funding for the state's transportation infrastructure. And in a state with \$3.5 billion in unmet transportation needs, ensuring that people understand transportation's impact on their quality of life and their wallet is essential.

Pennsylvania has the highest number of structurally deficient bridges in the country, and we maintain more miles of roadway than all of New England combined. By underinvesting in our infrastructure in the past, we've put ourselves in a position where we can't expand capacity because our maintenance needs are so great.

By the numbers, roughly 5000 of the 25,000 bridges PennDOT maintains are structurally deficient, or in need of repair. In addition, the state has closed 50 bridges, 650 more have weight restrictions, and 14,000 bridges have deteriorated or are nearing structurally deficient status. More than 8000 of the 40,000 roadway miles PennDOT maintains need to be repaired. Transit providers across the state are facing increased costs, aging equipment, and declining funding even amid ridership

increases. It's only a matter of time before long detours and increased congestion on worn-down roadways impact Pennsylvanians drastically.

The daunting figures stacked against PennDOT's budgetary constraints aren't for a lack of vigilance or effort. PennDOT ensures that every bridge is inspected at least once every 2 years. Federal recovery funding, coupled with state funding focused on improving bridges, has improved the state's structurally deficient bridges. Still, for every two bridges taken off the structurally deficient list, one is added—a fact that can be attributed to the state's average bridge age of 50 years. Without sustained and increased investment, the number of structurally deficient bridges and miles of poor roadway will begin to climb again.

Citing the well-documented need to improve the state's infrastructure, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett is committed to finding funding opportunities the state can implement in the current economic climate. We are carrying out the administration's mission to achieve that goal in a way that makes sense for Pennsylvanians.

The reality is that people are being charged more by using more gasoline and increasing wear and tear on their cars by sitting in traffic and taking detours. Instead, they could pay 70

cents a week and we'll fix the problem. Even if they would pay \$2.50 a week, that's cheaper than wasting even half a gallon of gasoline a day in congestion.

An average person driving 12,000 miles per year uses 500 gallons of gasoline. Fifty cents in fuel taxes costs that driver \$250 a year, increasing to approximately \$300 a year when license and registration fees are added in.

Even if a person spends \$360 a year in fees and fuel taxes, that's about \$30 a month. I ask everyone to compare that cost to their monthly cable, cell phone, or internet bills. The return on investment for transportation is huge.

When people make the connection between the roads they take to work, the transit bus their relatives take to the store, and the bridges that carry trucks delivering groceries and other goods, the value of transportation investments becomes plain. If Pennsylvania increases its transportation utility bill, the investment will pay dividends for its businesses and citizens.

For more information on PennDOT, visit www.dot.state.pa.us.

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Significant flood damage sustained in north central Pennsylvania with the combined rains of Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee during fall of 2011. Photos: PennDOT District 3 engineering staff.