

TRANSPORTATION FUNDING: WHAT IT MEANS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

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With the signing of Act 89 (aka House Bill 1060) by Governor Corbett on November 25, 2013, Pennsylvania enacted a comprehensive, multimodal measure to help address the Commonwealth's transportation funding needs. It took several years of sustained efforts by many people and organizations, including PSATS, to help get this measure to the finish line where it passed with bipartisan support.

FUNDING OF PENNDOT/SEPTA PROJECTS BENEFITS LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Even though the majority of the funding increase will be going to PennDOT projects, municipalities will see many benefits from these projects on PennDOT maintained roads. Newly constructed left turn lanes will increase capacity, thus eliminating the need for the public to use municipally maintained roads to by-pass congested intersections. Adding turn lanes and turn arrows to traffic signals will also improve public safety, thus reducing municipal costs related to crashes that occur when left turns are completed out of the thru lane. Rehabbing/replacing bridges instead of posting them for weight limits or closing them entirely not only reduces the traffic volumes along the posted detour route on other state highways, but also reduces the traffic on the unofficial detour routes on municipally maintained roads used by much of the motoring public. PennDOT funding for trail construction for use by local residents will also increase significantly under Act 89.

Without an enhanced transportation funding plan, SEPTA would have been forced to make drastic cuts to its Regional Rail system. Some of these cuts would have been due to the age of its bridges, numerous are well over 100 years old. Many of these cuts would have been due to the age of the rail cars themselves and the problems associated with relying on rail cars over 50 years in age. One such reduction would have affected 4,000 inbound and 4,000 outbound riders a day. If half of those people used the train in the peak hour, the 2000 extra peak hour automobiles forced onto the parallel highway system would have had a significant impact. By comparison, the maximum capacity of a travel lane on an interstate highway is 2,000 cars per hour. Therefore, a contraction in service along even one rail line impacting 2,000 peak hour riders would have required an additional travel lane in each direction along the parallel limited access highway network just to maintain the same congested travel conditions that exist today.

ADDITIONAL FUNDING FOR MUNICIPAL PROJECTS

Besides enhanced funding for PennDOT projects, approximately 10 percent of the funding from this bill will be dedicated to local government. In Year 1 (2014), overall funding for local roads and bridges will increase by approximately \$34 million across the Commonwealth. By Year 5 in 2018, this overall funding level will increase to approximately \$237 million.

For years, municipal governments have been struggling with maintaining a network increasing in age. Now, some funding help is on the way. One of the major provisions in this bill for municipal governments is the increase in the liquid fuels allocation. By Year 5, the liquid fuels allocation to municipalities will be 60% greater than current levels with an increase of approximately \$220 million statewide. On a related subject, PennDOT has had a Turnback program for many years that very few municipalities have participated in because the cost of maintaining these roads far outweighed any benefit gained from turning them back from state to local control. With the passage of Act 89, this option will now be more of a consideration in some municipalities.

Funding for traffic signals will also be increased significantly. Coordination of traffic signals will be a major focus of PennDOT as it looks to increase capacity and improve public safety on their arterial network. In addition, a grant program was established in the bill establishing a fund with a 50% local match for traffic signal initiatives. In fiscal year 2014 - 2015, \$10 million will be allocated for upgrading to LED signals, performing regional operations such as retiming, developing special event plans, and monitoring. In fiscal year 2015 - 2016, this fund increases to \$25 million and will also permit funding to be used for maintaining and operating traffic signals. In fiscal year 2016 - 2017 and each year thereafter, \$40 million will be allocated for this initiative.

Many low volume rural roads in the state remain unpaved. To address this situation, \$8 million in the Act is being allocated to these unpaved roadways.

BENEFITS THAT DID NOT REQUIRE FUNDING INCREASES

Not all municipality benefits involve enhanced funding. PennDOT has been making several improvements on the efficiency side as well that will benefit local governments. In serving on the Governor's Transportation Funding Advisory Commission, I advocated to eliminate the need to custom design every single bridge because the cost to design a short span nearly equals the construction cost. As a result, PennDOT will be undertaking a bridge bundling program where the same design will be used for bridges of the same length and width and carrying roughly the same traffic volumes. Local governments will be able to participate in this bridge bundling program with a reduction or possible elimination of their local match contribution as a result.

Another non-funding benefit to municipalities is the change in the Prevailing Wage threshold for locally funded transportation projects. The threshold will increase from its current level of \$25,000 to \$100,000 on such capital projects.

CONCLUSION

Whether it is the indirect benefits gained from improvements to the PennDOT/SEPTA system, the direct benefit of increased funding to local governments, or the benefits to municipalities from non-funding changes in Act 89, passage of this bill will be a significant benefit to local governments for years to come.

About the Author

As the President of Traffic Planning and Design, Inc. (TPD), a firm operating out of Pennsylvania and New Jersey that serves the Mid-Atlantic region, Mr. Johnson's areas of expertise are in transportation engineering and design, transportation planning, and environmental analyses. Mr. Johnson previously served as one of just four engineers on Governor Corbett's Transportation Funding Advisory Commission, playing an integral role in transportation education and awareness. He is a member of the SEPTA Board of Directors, the second engineer to serve in this capacity. Mr. Johnson also serves on the Board of Directors of the Associated Pennsylvania Constructors (APC) and is a member of the Transportation Committee for the ACEC/PA. During his 28 year career, Mr. Johnson has prepared and managed highway and intersection final design plans for over 400 projects and has prepared and managed nearly 2,000 traffic impact and parking studies nationwide for a variety of commercial, office, residential, municipal, educational, institutional, industrial, hospital/continuing care, and solid waste disposal projects. He has served as an expert witness for over 500 such projects throughout Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware.

