TOWNSHIPS TODAY

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER BROUGHT TO YOU BY YOUR TOWNSHIP

New Funding Package Improves Roads, Bridges, and Public Safety

Warmer weather is just around the corner, and no matter where you live or travel in Pennsylvania, you're going to see many more road and bridge projects springing to life.

It's all because state lawmakers did something last fall that had been talked about for years: Following Gov. Tom Corbett's lead, they enacted a $2.3 billion transportation funding package that's expected to greatly improve public safety, create jobs — up to 50,000 — and encourage business growth and development.

And while this is good news for Pennsylvania, it's even better news for municipalities, which are responsible for more roads miles — 77,000 — than the state Department of Transportation, which oversees 44,000 miles.

Secretary of Transportation Barry Schoch says it was time for the commonwealth to move forward with a spending plan.

"Ultimately, we have a responsibility for public safety," he says, "and had to choose whether to make the investment now or continue to put it off for future generations."

Better roads and bridges aren't the only benefits of Pennsylvania's new $2.3 billion transportation funding package. The plan promises to create some 50,000 jobs and give the ecomony a boost with more business growth and development.

Benefits spread from local roads to state highways

No doubt, the new revenues will make a marked difference in our township and others, many of which, faced with rising transportation costs and stagnant state funding, had been

slapping Band-Aids on roads and bridges for decades to prolong their life.

The new funding package, however, will deliver a two-thirds increase in the annual liquid fuels payments that municipalities receive. This state funding, which helps our township pay for road projects and purchase materials such as salt, will increase by $237 million annually after the law is fully enacted in five years.

Significantly more money is in the pipeline, too, to improve dirt, gravel, and low-volume roads, aging bridges, and outdated traffic signals. A higher prevailing wage threshold for local road and bridge projects, another key provision in the funding package, will also enable townships to save money and schedule more work.

In addition to all of this, the plan is going to direct another $1.2 billion a year to improve state-owned infrastructure.

This includes widening a section of Route 22 in Allentown; rehabbing part of Route 219 near Johnstown; upgrading Interchange Road in suburban Erie; resurfacing sections of Route 22 in northern Washington County; widening Route 202 in East Norriton and Whitpain Townships, Montgomery County; and extending Route 424 to connect Interstate 81 to Humboldt Industrial Park near Hazleton.

PennDOT also plans to spend $782 million for three Interstate 83-related projects in the Harrisburg area and $761 million to relocate U.S. Route 322 from the top of Seven Mountains to Boalsburg in Centre County, southeast of State College.

In addition to improving public safety, Schoch says, the transportation funding will benefit the economy by making Pennsylvania competitive with surrounding states, such as Maryland and Virginia, which recently passed their own funding initiatives.

"This measure sent a clear message to the business community," he said on the day of passage. "We need to rebuild and take care of Pennsylvania's transportation system, which all of us own."

'This is a huge deal'

The last time Pennsylvania made a major investment in transportation was nearly two decades ago, in 1997, when it enacted a 3½-cent increase in the state's gasoline tax, a fickle levy that fluctuates with prices and demand.

In the meantime, the commonwealth's interstate transportation network, much of which was built in the 1950s during the Eisenhower administration, has continued to age and weaken, and it's been harder and harder financially for state and local officials to stay on top of the problems.

In 2013, for instance, PennDOT imposed new stricter weight restrictions on 1,000 state and local bridges to slow the deterioration — a move that increased detours, which added potentially life-threatening minutes to emergency response times and hindered the flow of goods and services.

The ever-worsening situation prompted local government and business leaders, among others, to urge the General Assembly to not only develop a long-term, sustainable funding stream to support transportation but also to address the needs of the entire system — everything from local roads and bridges to highways, railroads, and ports.

As a result, lawmakers made several attempts to initiate comprehensive transportation reforms; however, the proposals stalled repeatedly. The most recent example unfolded this past summer when a billion-dollar transportation funding bill received nearly unanimous support in the Senate but fizzled in the House. Political fear about increasing the price of gasoline, which has flirted with $4 a gallon, has been at the root of this and other failures.

However, as 2013 drew to a close, something shifted in Harrisburg, and those requests for a multi-layered transportation funding package became a reality.

"This is a huge deal," Sen. John Rafferty, majority chair of the Senate Transportation Committee, says. "It's the most significant piece of infrastructure legislation that's been done in 20-plus years."

Common sense prevailed

Within the next five years, the funding package will generate billions more a year for roads, bridges, and mass transit by uncapping the state's oil franchise tax, increasing various traffic fines, fees, and surcharges, and eliminating the cents-per-gallon gas tax.

"The stars aligned because I think the legislature came to the realization that it had to address [transportation] sooner, rather than later," says Jason Wagner, managing director of the Pennsylvania Highway Information Association and director of policy and government relations for Associated Pennsylvania Constructors, an organization for road and bridge builders.

In other words, common sense prevailed, says Rep. Nicholas Micozzie, who took over as chair of the House Transportation Committee just weeks before Act 89's passage.

"There are 25,000 bridges in Pennsylvania, and 650 are posted with weight limits and 18 percent are obsolete. We have another 9,000 miles of state roads that are in bad shape," Micozzie says. "We kept banging away at that message, and it finally — finally — sunk in."

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