

**House Transportation Committee Hearing
Clarion, PA
June 17, 2010**

**Presenter: Daniel Gracenin, Executive Director Mercer County Regional Planning
Commission**

First off I would like to say thank you to majority Chairman Markosek and Minority Chairman Geist for allowing me this opportunity to speak before the Transportation Committee on behalf of the Mercer County MPO this afternoon. I will keep my comments short and to the point of today's discussion, and would be more than happy to answer questions you have during my testimony.

I would like to start my testimony today by specifically addressing the five (5) questions which were identified in your May 14, 2010 letter, which identified the purpose of today's hearing.

1. Do we believe that our public transportation and state highway and bridge systems are in a financial crisis?

The simple answer to this question is yes. How we arrived at the crisis is a question that is not so easily answered. Within the Mercer County MPO we have long taken the position to make "Asset Management" a top priority, even to the point of some past MPO voting members disagreeing with this approach. On the highway side of transportation we have been able to maintain our system relatively well, but still do not have the funds to fully maintain the existing roadways on the state system. Mercer County like many other areas of the State in the last year and a half used the federal ARRA funding to bolster our asset management priorities as well. Without this infusion of money Mercer County would not have had the resources necessary to provide basic maintenance on many important roadways. The issue of local roadways is another problem. During the course of our regularly scheduled MPO meetings we have had many elected officials state the State liquid fuels allocations are inadequate to meet local needs, and as a result it is evident that many small municipalities within Mercer County have roadways that are inadequate and potentially unsafe. As a Planner I believe that growth is needed to sustain our communities, but that where and how this growth occurs impacts infrastructure needs and therefore should be carefully examined to ensure that we can support new growth areas in the future. Although this may not be a direct question for today's hearing the issue of local road and bridge needs also impacts the ability of our communities to provide safe and efficient systems for residents as well as existing and potentially new economic development. On the issue of public transit I will allow others to speak of their specific needs.

2. How has Pennsylvania's deficient infrastructure directly or indirectly, impacted your ability to improve transportation in your region?

Our region has been impacted as I would expect every other region in Pennsylvania has because we all have deficiencies in our systems, we all suffer from the lack of adequate funding to complete what is necessary to maintain the system let alone attempt to build new capacity adding projects. This is evident in Mercer in that our TIP for the last 2 -3 cycles has been dominated by addition of structurally deficient (SD) bridges into the TIP listings, which is a priority of ours as well as PENN DOTs, but does not allow the MPO much if any ability to promote projects which local officials view as vital for the safety of residents or the ability to promote economic development in the County where road infrastructure improvements would be necessary. Within Mercer County 72 out of 422 state bridges have been identified as being SD equating to 17% which is lower than the state percentage of 22% (5656/25332), but still too high of a percentage to allow us to say our infrastructure is adequate. An example of how these deficiencies have affected our ability to improve the transportation system is seen in our current draft 2011-2014 TIP. The draft TIP for Mercer County has a projected funding level of 77.1 million of which 42.7 million or 55% will go toward bridges. Because we are funding bridges at such high levels, which I support due to the need, it does impact our ability to improve our transportation system in other areas such as highway improvements, pedestrian needs etc.

3. Is inaction acceptable?

The answer to this question is simply no...It is my belief that should the Commonwealth not be able to identify alternative funding sources to provide additional funding to the MPOs/RPOs we as residents will all suffer with highways, bridges and transit issues which will lead to a system that will become unsafe and not efficient for residents and businesses alike. The example would be a bridge that has been closed causing detours which would reroute traffic to other roadways which may or may not be able to handle this traffic causing safety and efficiency issues. Inadequate funding also puts Pennsylvania at a disadvantage when attempting to attract new business and keep existing ones. Inaction now will only lead to larger problems in the future. Had we all in the past maintained our system before expanding our systems we would not be having this discussion today, none the less we are all in this together and we all must find a way to resolve this issue.

4. If inaction is not acceptable, what level of additional funding is necessary for the improvements you are advocating?

This question is a difficult question to answer because our current plans are developed to be fiscally constrained as required by federal law. On this issue of Bridge funding PENN DOT is better able to provide the amount of additional funding that would be needed to bring the deficient bridge percentage to zero. As for Highway projects one project that has been a top priority for the MPO since it was studied in 1999 is the Broadway corridor project located in the Shenango Valley due to the size of this project it

has been split into smaller projects in order to maintain fiscal responsibility. On this one project alone we need an estimated additional 9.4 million to complete the second phase of this project. This would however complete just half of the envisioned project that was studied 11 years ago, but not moved forward due to the lack of funding. There are numerous other projects listed in our Long Range Transportation Plan that would also benefit for additional funding, but my view is that the additional funding is needed primarily to just to bring us up to acceptable standards while still attempting to provide additional projects which will promote economic development.

5. What additional improvements could be accomplished in the region (safety/congestion, etc.) if funding were enhanced.

Additional funding will allow us to continue to catch up on the SD bridges and allow us to move ahead with projects that promote economic development within the County. As mentioned previously numerous projects have been identified in the LRP and additional funding would potentially allow us to complete these projects in a more time efficient manner.

I have attempted here today to address the questions that were posed to us by providing some examples of needs within Mercer County. The one question that was not asked is where the additional funding come from would especially since the tolling of I-80 has been rejected by the FHWA. I do not have a single answer for this issue, but believe it may need to come from a variety of sources, such as user fees. As I stated in my STC hearing testimony last year a short term fix may require an increase in the gas tax, as unpopular as that may be. But this is a short term fix with vehicles becoming more fuel efficient and hybrids coming to market the amount of funding available through gas taxes will probably not be able to keep up with future infrastructure needs. If Pennsylvania is to provide additional revenue to the MPOs/RPOs it will need to come from somewhere, i.e. increased registration fees, gas tax increase etc. On this issue I ask that what ever funding mechanisms may be identified that they are equally applied to all residents of the Commonwealth. Once again I thank you for allowing me this opportunity today, and would be happy to answer any of your questions.