

**PA House of Representatives  
Transportation and Policy Committees  
2010 Special Session on Transportation  
June 17, 2010 Hearing**

**TESTIMONY OF JAKE S. WELSH, AICP  
DIRECTOR, ERIE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING**

Good morning members of the PA House of Representatives' Transportation and Policy Committees. I am Jake Welsh, Director of the Erie County Department of Planning, and Secretary of the Erie MPO.

As we all know, transportation investments play an essential role in facilitating the vision for any region's future. The County's land use, community facilities and utilities, housing, and historic and natural resources plans, which express that vision, and provide guidance and direction for making sound infrastructure and development investments throughout the County, are all inextricably tied to, and reliant on, the region's transportation system. As such, implementation of the transportation plan for Erie County is arguably the most important component of our comprehensive planning efforts. The transportation system acts as the vehicle which allows the other components to be achieved.

With the recognition of this direct relationship between our land use and economic development aspirations and transportation, adequate funding to implement transportation improvements is critical to sustaining our existing systems and supporting future growth. Considerations for the Erie region relating to our transportation infrastructure:

**Land Use / Population** – Land use in Erie County is diverse, including large areas of urban and suburban development, and small rural villages, agricultural and undeveloped areas. The majority of the population and development in the county is concentrated along the urbanized-suburbanized Lake Erie / I-90 corridor, in a strip from the Girard-Lake City area to North East, comprising roughly 80% of the County's

280,000 residents. There are several rural development centers (i.e., Albion-Cranesville, Corry, Edinboro, Union City, and Waterford), which are all focused on one or two major highways, generally along the southern tier of the County. The remainder of the county is less densely settled and largely rural in character, with considerable agricultural areas. Though the population in Erie County is relatively stable, land development is continuing to occur, predominately along the I-90 and I-79 corridors.

**Employment / Industry** – Erie County has historically been recognized as a manufacturing center, and though employment has fallen over the last three decades, continues to have a large manufacturing sector in relation to other PA counties and the national average, with roughly 15% of its workforce employed in that industry. Other significant employment sectors include education, health care & social assistance, and retail services. Erie County is also a very active agricultural area, ranking in the top ten counties in PA, with exceptional fruit and vegetable growing operations (particularly grape and potato production). The county is also a significant tourism and recreation area. Along with Presque Isle, the county's 44 miles of lakeshore provides all of the amenities associated with water, beach and fishing activities, including renowned high quality walleye, perch and steelhead trout fisheries. The Great Lakes Seaway Trail and PA Route 6 Heritage Corridor also attract visitors seeking to experience the regions' many natural, cultural and recreational amenities.

The diversity of the area's geography, population and industry has served to define Erie County's identity and role in northwest Pennsylvania as a regional economic center, and will likely determine its sustainability as such into the future. The importance of maintaining the transportation infrastructure to foster that sustainability cannot be overstressed. Providing the necessary funding for transportation is critical. Without a commitment of adequate funds, the infrastructure, economy and character of our region will greatly suffer, as will the Commonwealth's.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our concerns, we greatly appreciate and urge your continued support.

We appreciate the House Transportation Committee and Policy Committees for holding this hearing and allowing the Clarion region to voice some of their concerns with the Commonwealth's transportation future. You are correct that inaction is not acceptable. The path that Act 44 has taken the legislature over the past three years is equally unacceptable. Since July 2007 legislative leaders in Harrisburg have known that the plan to toll I-80 most-likely did not meet federal guidelines for converting Interstate 80 to a tolled facility. Despite previous rejections of Pennsylvania's application for tolling authority and a vocal majority of citizens in the Commonwealth opposing the tolling plan, the legislature and Governor pushed on.

The tolling tunnel vision that consumed Harrisburg was never more present than when Governor Rendell repeatedly told the press that there was "No plan B". In fact, Mr. Chairman on March 10<sup>th</sup> you confirmed this for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, claiming "Act 44 of 2007, which included the I-80 tolls, was plan B."

While these events might be in the past and hindsight is undoubtedly 20/20, the good people of Clarion were steadfast in their opposition to the plan from the beginning.

I must commend the Committee and its leadership, Mr. Markosek and Mr. Geist for listening to the citizens today. These hearings are important because for the first time, the people of Clarion will have a voice that may count for something.

In August 2007, we met with Pennsylvania Turnpike CEO, Joe Brimmeir. In November 2007 we met with PTC and in December 2007 with the PTC and Chairman Markosek. Again, two subsequent meetings occurred with Chairman Markosek in December of 2008 and November of 2009. At each of these meetings we were very clear in our explanation and concerns with tolling and how it affected the corridor of I-80. We are also very clear in our understanding that legally, the proposal would not meet the letter of the law. In December 2008, we addressed alternatives to the toll plan.

In the November 2007 meetings that the PTC held, we ask that you tell us what the impact of tolling I-80 would have on the corridor. Promises were made that studies would be done? Yet, we did not ever see any studies.

It took a group of concerned citizens to commission an independent study that resulted in showing the adverse affect on not only the I-80 corridor, but the entire Commonwealth. .

A 2006 report was released by the Governor's Transportation Funding & Reform Commission The first thing the report recommended was for the legislature to look at spending before taking steps to raise revenue.. I -80 was not an option addressed in the report.

Most of the arguments you have are that the cost of maintaining I-80 should be paid for by the truck traffic traveling on the highway. The people and the truckers themselves have been telling

you they do pay for the roads in the form of fees and taxes. That money comes back to the Commonwealth by estimates ranging from \$130-\$240 million. With maintenance costs of around \$80 million dollars annually, those fees are recovered.

I bring a simple message to the committee today. We must examine how highway funds are actually being allocated. Recent media accounts have shown the remorse by SEPTA and PAT over the federal rejection of I-80 tolling. Obviously the tolling was directly going to these systems to help fund them. All I ask is that we as a Commonwealth put forth a transparent process and truly separate the Highway from the Transit accounts. While this is done with state dollars, the Rendell Administration has flexed federal funds in the amount of \$412 million between 2004-2007. The legislature should reign in the powers of the executive to ensure that valuable highway dollars are not going to subsidize transit costs.

Do not get me wrong. The Commonwealth needs transit, without it the economy would slow, but the legislature must find ways of making transit sustainable. Additionally, full and transparent revenue sources and expenses should be delineated in this year's budget.

Other ideas will be presented by others, but I hope that lawmakers will consider that they need to repeal ACT 44. As long as Act 44 is still law, there will be a problem meeting it's funding obligations.

Mr. Chairman, if I can leave you with one message today – it is the message that I-80 tolling should no longer be part of the equation. The region has spoken, the federal government has spoken on numerous occasions. A regional band-aid is not a commonwealth-wide solution.

As citizens we elect our legislators to lead. While gaining information is crucial to solving our transportation funding shortfalls, the burden of coming up with those solutions ultimately rests on the elected official. Afterall, that's in the job description.

Thank you.