

PENTRANS

Pennsylvania coalition working together for better transportation

Testimony of Peter Javscas
PenTrans Executive Director
June 4th 2010 Public Hearing
St. Joseph's University

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Thanks to all of you for paying attention to this issue that is critical for our economic, environmental and social well-being. And thanks to Representatives Joe Markosek and Rick Geist for working together to make these hearings possible.

I'm Peter Javscas, head of Pennsylvanians for Transportation Solutions, Inc. – PenTrans. Our nonprofit group has diverse membership, but the backbone of the organization consists of transportation industry companies: consultants – engineers, economists, land use planners and architects who understand and support improvements in mobility and access for all Pennsylvanians. Their firms together are responsible for thousands of jobs here in Pennsylvania – both directly and indirectly. PenTrans works to get adequate dedicated funding for public transportation and other improvements in mobility and access – for all the people of Pennsylvania.

Two of our PenTrans Board members, Richard Voith and Beverly Harper, were members of the 2007 Governor's Transportation Funding and Reform Commission. The findings of the Commission led to the passage of Act 44, a bill intended to finally provide a reliable stream of substantial new funding for Pennsylvania transportation – both highways and transit. A key funding source in that legislation was the tolling of I-80, a measure opposed by some in Pennsylvania and rejected in March of this year by the Federal Highway Administration.

Also in March, polling experts conducted a survey of 400 registered Pennsylvania voters regarding their views on transportation and transportation funding. The survey was commissioned by Smart Growth America, a nationally respected advocacy group.

Here are some of the findings that I think we should especially note.

A majority of those 400 registered voters share these views:

They're convinced that without the revenues from tolling Interstate 80, Pennsylvania will face a massive budget shortfall for public transportation, starting with \$160 million this year alone. – 51%

They're convinced that as the state and local communities face budget shortfalls, we will see declining road quality, cuts to transit service, and fare increases. The great majority of these voters agree that we need to keep our train and bus service available and affordable especially for seniors, the disabled and workers who rely on it to get to and from their jobs. – 84%

They're convinced that expanding and improving our public transportation options will give more residents an alternative to driving and help us reduce our dependence on foreign oil. – 76%

They're convinced that by maintaining and improving our public transportation system, it will be easier for Pennsylvania residents to drive less, reducing air pollution that causes a billion dollars annually in lung disease and asthma. – 68%

They're convinced that new roads projects should be cut before any transit investments are reduced. Two-thirds of them said that.

They're convinced that we should help communities better plan development near rail and bus lines so that residents, shoppers, and workers have greater transportation options and local economies are boosted – 53% approval.

They're convinced that we should keep public transportation affordable for all users –73% approval.

And, they're convinced that we all should chip in more to improve Pennsylvania transportation.

The poll found that 64% of voters would be willing to pay an additional \$50 annually to get those improvements.

Check my math on this: there are about 12 million Pennsylvania residents, so 50 times 12 million would be \$600 million, right? Five times twelve is sixty, so 50 times twelve is 600, so that would be \$600 million dollars. That's more than the \$484 million dollars we're told is needed right now to close the transportation funding gap for both highways and transit. \$600 million is \$116 million more than \$484 million. So we could put that \$116 million toward the \$3.5 billion we need long term, right?

Does this send a message to our legislators? I hope so.

Maybe you question these poll results because it was commissioned by an advocacy group that favors more spending on smart growth. Smart growth means improvements in mobility and access through better land use policies, such as transit oriented development; safer streets that are welcoming to pedestrians and cyclists as well as cars and trucks; and better public transportation.

Well, here's another measure of the public's willingness to pay for those improvements. In the 2008 national elections, 80 % of ballot initiatives calling for increased taxes and fees for better public transportation were approved by the public. They said yes, we will pay more because we want those public transportation improvements.

But wait a minute. Suppose you live in a rural or small town Pennsylvania. You don't have the huge transit and traffic needs of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. But you still have mobility and access problems – big time. Because the price of gas is only going to go up over the coming years. Not only gas but every form of energy will get way more expensive. And one way or another, driving is going to get less and less affordable.

Meanwhile, because of the funding crisis, rural and medium size transit agencies are getting the breath squeezed out of them. Just when they are more needed than ever, they're cutting back on service, raising fares and not making the capital improvements needed just to stay reliable. Old equipment means more breakdowns and higher operating costs. Just read the testimony from the Union Snyder Transportation Alliance at the Lock Haven public hearing.

So, all too often, folks in the rural regions see driving as the only way to go. And they don't want *their tax dollars* going to Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Never mind that more tax dollars come from the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh regions than from all the other 61 counties combined.

Yes, rural and small towns need transportation alternatives – but they might be different alternatives than what the cities need. And if you're a legislator, you've got to listen to your constituents. So like many other states, we've got that urban-rural divide that stalls a lot of crucial decision making.

Same thing in Georgia, for instance. And Georgia is trying a new, bipartisan, rural-urban approach that might work here in Pennsylvania too. Georgia is going to let each region have a 1% sales tax specifically for transportation. And let *each region* decide how to best use the funds to deal with the transportation challenges of that region. The state can incentivize the process with its own share of funds. If you want to know more, you can read about it in the PenTrans newsletter which you can find on our web site and on Facebook.

Or maybe there's a better idea. The central point is that we need to make a bigger investment in alternatives to driving. Whether the funding is from increased fees, oil franchise taxes, gasoline taxes, Marcellus Shale taxes alcoholic drinks or tobacco taxes – or some combination of the many suggested methods, the public has shown that they are willing to make that investment – *if* they have a clear understanding of how they will benefit.

Legislators and all of us need to work harder to highlight those benefits, mobilize public support and take a decisive step in Harrisburg.

And \$50 times 12 million would be nice. It would be like everyone winning the lottery.

That's all. Thank you.