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Legislature urged to make critical highway, bridge repairs

By Jon Schmitz, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A diverse lineup of speakers urged the state Legislature on Friday to find the political courage to raise taxes and fees to rescue the state's decaying transportation system.

At a public hearing of the state House Transportation Committee in Monroeville, the word "crisis" was used freely in describing the state of highway and bridge programs and mass transit, all of which rely heavily on funding sources that have been stagnant or declining for years.

"Transportation is the driver of economic development ... Short-term fixes and the Band-Aid approach no longer work," said Lynn DeLorenzo, president-elect of the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties' Pittsburgh chapter, which represents developers and owners of office, industrial and mixed-use buildings.

"Will we continue down this path until we see a Pennsylvania bridge collapse on CNN?" asked John Tague Jr., treasurer of the Pennsylvania Transportation Alliance, a transit advocacy group.

The speakers represented business and labor groups, including the trucking and construction industries, governments, and advocates for the environment and the disabled.

"Perhaps the most fundamental purpose of state government is to provide sound infrastructure. We seem to be failing miserably at that," said Chad Amond, president of the Monroeville Area Chamber of Commerce.

Two organizations that faced off in 2008 during Port Authority contract negotiations -- the pro-business Allegheny Conference on Community Development and Local 85 of the Amalgamated Transit Union -- sang in two-part harmony.

"Election year business as usual is no longer good enough," said Ken Zapinski, conference vice president, urging a state rescue of the Port Authority, which faces massive service cuts and layoffs to close a \$50 million deficit.

Mr. Zapinski, an outspoken critic of the authority's past financial practices, said "over the last four years, the Port Authority has undergone more radical improvement than any big-city transit agency in the country, bringing its expenses and its operations in line with reality."

"The reality is if we want a viable transit system, we have to pay for it," transit union President Patrick McMahon told lawmakers. "Have the political will to do the right thing."

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation district executives for southwestern Pennsylvania showed slides of crumbling roads and bridges that are not scheduled for repairs and said projected funding for the region will fall more than \$300 million short of what is needed in the coming year.

Dan Cessna of District 11, covering Allegheny, Beaver and Lawrence counties, and Joseph Szczur of District 12, made up of Fayette, Greene, Washington and Westmoreland, urged lawmakers to enact a long-term, predictable and sustainable funding method. There are more

than 1,200 structurally deficient bridges and 1,200 miles of roads rated "poor" under the International Roughness Index in the two districts.

"We need a solution immediately," Mr. Cessna said when asked if a fix could wait until next year, when no legislators face re-election.

"Our house is broken. It's really broken. We've got to fix this problem," said Rep. Rick Geist, R-Blair, the transportation committee's minority chairman, in an earlier meeting Friday with Pittsburgh Post-Gazette editors.

Highway and bridge programs and transit systems have seen their buying power erode for more than a decade as their main funding sources have declined or stayed flat.

The state hasn't raised its gasoline tax for 13 years. Consumers still pay the same 32.3 cents they paid when gas sold for \$1 per gallon. During the same time, construction prices have soared beyond the rate of inflation.

The federal gasoline tax of 18.4 cents, a principal source of highway money that is channeled to states, hasn't been raised since 1992. Pennsylvania's fee for registering a vehicle, \$36, hasn't increased since 1997.

Pennsylvania's funding woes worsened in April when the Federal Highway Administration rejected the state's bid to impose tolls on Interstate 80. That shrunk available transportation funding for the coming year by nearly \$500 million.

"It's a bad political year. It's a bad economic year" to raise taxes or fees, acknowledged Rep. Joseph Markosek, D-Monroeville, the committee chairman. "But we just simply cannot let this go."

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