

“Investing in Our Future” Route 228 Project Policy Brief

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Contradictory to its title “Investing in Our Future” the Pennsylvania Transportation Funding and Reform Commission report released in late August of 2007, was written when the Commission was formed by Governor Rendell's Executive Order 2005-1 to investigate and make recommendations to rectify the structural imbalance between revenue and operating costs associated with transportation. In accordance with House Resolution 538, adopted by the Pennsylvania House on December 14th, 2006, this 2007 report outlined the transportation crisis within Pennsylvania pertaining to roads, bridges, and mass transit systems across the state, from the House Transportation Committee. This resolution was spurred on which called for an investigation into the funding and operating procedures of SEPTA (Philadelphia’s transit system) after it was learned that Governor Rendell diverted federal highway dollars between the years of 2004-2007, at a figure of \$258 million.

During this same time period, in the Southwestern region of the state, new businesses attracting and sustaining economic growth and development in the one of the fastest growing corridors of the entire commonwealth have been forced to sit idle waiting for the state to commit and move forward with the much needed Route 228 project. Specifically Simons Property Group has patiently waited approximately 6 and a ½ years with \$40.5 million on the table, add to that investment of Penn Dot’s funding at \$23.75 million, and the region is looking at approximately \$65 million ready to drive away from the region forever. The project cost estimate update of Phase One which totals approximately \$80 to \$85 million, will not see fruition without an additional \$20 million dollars and some great intervention. Add to that equation the fact that the state has taken \$4 million of those same dedicated funds in recent weeks and applied them to other statewide economic and development projects and its clear to see erosion and deterioration of more than a roadway, but, of hope and realization of a new way of life for those dependent upon the highway of success.

To say in the past, there is no dedicated funding was inaccurate. We had dedicated funding, but, we also had a Governor who took from one fund (\$258 million in this particular case) and gave it to another at his own discretion which has been a common occurrence and practice for the past eight years, Even more frequently those funds were diverted to benefit Philadelphia projects overall at Pennsylvania taxpayer’s expense. Pennsylvanians should be asking themselves why we have a General Assembly which condones this practice and grants the authority and approval to do this on a regular basis? While I’m not suggesting Pennsylvanians are not in this predicament because of our Governor’s discretionary practices of robbing Peter to pay Paul for eight years, I am suggesting his past spending practices does have some influence and direct correlation in the current situation of having our commonwealth in a billion dollar deficit for 2008.

When one hypothetically puts \$258 million in one pocket to bail out a mismanaged transit system in Philadelphia and in another pocket a \$20 million dollar deficit needed to make the Route 228 project in Southwestern Pennsylvania a reality which is also going to spurn on more tax dollars in more ways than one for not only the region but the commonwealth as a whole? I question the logic in more ways than one? But, its not about logic, its about politics and politics always trumps logic. It's safe to assume the Governor certainly was not investing in "our future" but, that of his own.

Based on the House report, SEPTA received a significant amount of funding from the state, with the transit authority predicting a \$50 million dollar deficit in its 2007 operating budget, despite the state paying for 75% of the operation's funding. Between the two separate transportation reports released in both August and September of 2007, there contained grim but realistic findings that there would be no funding to sustain the current transit system and there was no funding to sustain the maintenance of existing roads or for new and future ones. Add to this equation, an incident no one ever imagined possible would ever happen... the tragic collapse of the Minneapolis, Minnesota I-35W bridge over the Mississippi during rush hour on August 1, 2007, plunging dozens of cars and their occupants into the river. The calamity disrupted transportation and aimed a spotlight on deterioration and maintenance of public infrastructure systems. With public panic, as Pennsylvania has more bridges than perhaps any other state, funding was redirected by our Governor toward repairing our Commonwealth's deteriorating bridges in 2007 and future bridge projections as well. Again, with no mention, of the \$258 million diverted to SEPTA.

To say to those who sit on Route 228 with their engines running, our money was given away, is an understatement. Our commonwealth now finds themselves potentially examining solutions such as all licensed drivers paying for a dollar surcharge, paying a higher fare for mass transit, or light rail riders, or paying an extra toll fee on interstate highways, gas sales tax, or even a personal income tax were amongst the suggestions proposed and offered to the Pennsylvania Transportation Funding and Reform Commission's September 12th, 2007 hearing in Pittsburgh as ways for government to solve the highway, bridge and transit funding issues proposed to exceed \$2.2 billion a year in additional spending. If one were to examine both reports, one would determine through various actuarial, audits, and projections for funding and operations to not only be sustainable back in 2007, but, also the current and future transportation systems (because of excessive debt) without massive and consistent tax increases. In 2008, we found our state officials contemplating leasing our state turnpike and placing tolls on I-80 as ways to generate new revenues. Now, fast forwarded into the last quarter of 2008, and the difficult national economy has compounded the problems of funding transportation ten fold seriously compromising the contradictory "Investing in Our future".

With these things in mind, there should be no Governor or state official toting any DECD cardboard checks to any entity, place, or person spurring on economic growth and development or for any other purposes, when our commonwealth is so easily able to walk away from the investment of those who sit idle patiently waiting in the 12th district

known as Cranberry Township, Southern Butler County, or Southwestern Pennsylvania. How ironic that we have lawmakers who invest millions in stadium and casino infrastructures in our cities of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia where growth is steadily declining through the past ten years because of unfriendly tax structures....and they are willing to flip the nose to the massive and consistent growth occurring in Southwestern Pennsylvania whose same residents support these Allegheny County venues from time to time, but, live outside of Allegheny County and have migrated to where new business and new economies evolve? Like discretionary spending by governance structures in debt, it defies ordinary logic, reason, and common sense. Examining various policy issues, we've got systems and government structures in debt, borrowed against, and still in debt and no new revenues to get it out of debt or to sustain operational processes in a new and coming year without a massive tax increase somewhere. October 7, 2008, Harrisburg leaders announced and my sources have confirmed, that our state is expected to see a billion dollar debt at the end of 2008 and more than \$2.5, perhaps, even \$3 billion by the end of 2009. Pennsylvanians bailing out failed government systems is becoming a common occurrence and will likely only increase along with more government regulation for failed oversight and accountability systems.

Officials and Constituents of Southwestern Pennsylvania need to quickly organize their best and brightest policy people to formulate a formal plan outlining goals and objectives, hire people who can best put them into action with a strategy and work to see this project reach full fruition. The process can and may take years, but, it beats sitting idle behind traffic on an already heavily congested two lane highway which is already unable to accommodate growth in a safe and efficient manner. We need to implore the government to commit a certain percentage of federal highway money to be annually socked away in a specific capital interest bearing fund while moving forward with the project and money that is currently on the table. Taxpayers need reassurances that state government will not abandon future economic development and infrastructure projects in the future and if so, we need to know what objective criteria was utilized and by whom, when making those life impacting decisions. Whose the one person or entity accountable? Taxpayers need to know who to go to....who's calling the shots? Taxpayers need to know what projects over ride the Route 228 Project in priority statewide? We need to know what project has more than \$65 million on the table and greater need and for what? There needs to be justification and an outlining of the objective criteria used to make that determination and again, who's accountable in that decision-making? Until then, and forever more, we've got to prohibit and forbid the past practice of traveling the state and passing out card board checks or WAM money, unless it can be justified for allowing a project such as the forward expansion of Route 228 to diminish once and for all. We have got to all put on our creative thinking caps and find innovative ways for allowing this process to move forward. It will take mass cooperation amongst all levels, a common strategy, and many hearts and minds working together for the common good. A vast comparison to our immigrant forefathers who invested years of their lives both physically and emotionally in building new roads and bridges often sacrificing their life for the project. While I'm not at all suggesting that, I am instead asking for common sense and innovation to meet

the needs of what is not just a growing economic corridor, but, a regional renaissance, for the future way of life of not just western Pennsylvania, but, of the entire commonwealth.

If we live up to the name of this report “Investing in Our Future” by walking away from the project with \$65 million ready to invest not counting all the millions previously invested for manpower, traffic, 4F, agricultural, and environmental studies along Adams Township’s Route 228 School Area...if this is how we respond and carry out this mission? Then there’s something terribly amiss. But, if we rise to its mission and standard simply beyond name, then we can truly achieve that very thing, “investing in our future”. It will take innovative and creative ways to achieve it, but, it can be done. The choice is ours. It is up to us all to determine who’s future to invest in and not allow it to be dictated by government entities which are not aligned with those of the needs of the people whom they are to represent.

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