



Lehigh Valley Planning Commission

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Our Aging Interstates

Pennsylvania's more than 2,700 miles of interstate highways snake into every corner of the state, carrying 1.8 million commuters a day and making the Commonwealth one of the busiest corridors for all those consumer goods people are buying from their phones this Christmas.

With the fourth-largest interstate system in the country, including the 63 miles in the Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania has long been the envy of other states, but now its interstates are deteriorating faster than they can be repaired, Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) Highway Delivery Division Chief Melissa J. Batula said during a report to the Lehigh Valley Transportation Study (LVTS) and Freight Advisory Committee earlier this month.

That includes Interstate 78 in the Lehigh Valley, where 62 percent of the roadway surface is rated to be in fair or poor condition, while just \$8 million of the \$259 million requested for "priority" projects has been programmed on the state's 12-year plan for interstates.

"We have a backlog of \$251 million in the Lehigh Valley. We're severely underfunded," Batula said. "And that's just what we need to keep the lights on. We've got to start talking about this amongst ourselves."

Those discussions won't come easy. A report by the Interstate Steering Committee states that \$13.8 billion in projects have been identified as priorities, while just \$7.3 billion has been slated to be spent over the next 12 years, leaving about 188 "priority" projects unfunded.

The ratio is even worse in the Lehigh Valley, where the more than 22,000 trucks daily – the second-highest statewide behind only I-81 – takes a greater toll on the roadway. Not only does the \$8 million allocated represent just 3% of what's been deemed priority projects, but 13.5 miles hasn't been rebuilt since it opened in 1958, Batula said. Doing that is listed as a priority that would cost \$210 million – none of which has been funded in the next Interstate 12-year plan.

Most roadways in the Lehigh Valley are maintained using a Transportation Improvement Program, administered by the LVPC and LVTS. The current \$534 million TIP, which runs through September of 2022, includes more than 100 projects, such as widening Route 22 and repairing Routes 33 and 309.

But I-78 is funded primarily out of the Interstate TIP, a separate \$458 million a year pot of money that has to cover 21 interstate highways statewide, including Philadelphia's I-95, Pittsburgh's I-79 and an I-80 that spans 311 miles.

The Lehigh Valley region's TIP isn't designed to repair I-78, but there is \$8 million in the next four years to make repairs from Fogelsville to the Berks County line, and concrete patching had been done in the past for \$4 million, said Michael Rebert, PennDOT District Executive. But the

proposed \$210 million rebuild can't be funded from the local TIP, without pulling money from other projects across the region.

"We've got problems out there and there just isn't enough money to deal with them," Rebert said of I-78. "We can pick off some smaller projects on I-78, but we're certainly not equipped to tackle a rebuild."

According to the Steering Committee report, the average age of the Lehigh Valley segments of I-78 is 34 years, and the average age of its 60 bridges is 31 years. According to the International Roughness Index (IRI) – an analysis that rates a roadway's surface - only 25 of the 63 miles are rated to be in good or excellent condition.

But the news is not all bad. A second measuring stick called the Overall Pavement Index (OPI) – a rating that includes structural stability, deterioration and roughness – rates 43 miles of I-78 in overall good or excellent condition.

Rebert explained that while that OPI rating is encouraging, the IRI conditions that have been giving Lehigh Valley motorists a rough ride for years, eventually deteriorate into structural problems later.

It's part of the reason PennDOT has requested a total rebuild of the western section of the road, rather than continued patches and overlays.

"In the current fiscal environment, I can't tell you where that money would come from," Rebert said. "Someone is going to have to come up with other answers."

There are no easy answers. A larger portion of the state's transportation money could be committed to maintain the interstates, but that would take money away from regional TIPs that have their own lengthy lists of unfunded priority projects.

Others in the past have suggested new revenues, from taxes or tolls. State legislators in 2013 approved Act 89, which raised gas taxes more than 25 cents per gallon over four years. But that gave Pennsylvania the highest gas tax in the nation at 77 cents, and even some advocates admit that gas tax revenues aren't reliable in the longer terms, when alternative energy such as hydrogen fuel cells and electric vehicles could potentially lessen the use of gas.

Former Gov. Ed Rendell in 2007 proposed raising revenues by tolling Interstate 80, but the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) said that couldn't be done without federal approval, unless new lanes were added. Since then, FHWA has rejected two requests by Pennsylvania to toll I-80.

For now, transportation leaders will have to work with the plan – and money -- they have.

"We have to be ready to start talking about this," Batula said. "We've got to let legislators know that we have to take care of this. We've severely underfunded our interstates"

