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Federal Action Keeps Lehigh Valley Transportation Projects Moving

The Lehigh Valley just embarked on a new four-year, \$452 million program to maintain and enhance the region's transportation network, but the plan only works if the Federal Highway Administration sends the money to pay for it.

Worries the transportation program could grind to a halt were alleviated last month when Congress approved a one-year extension to the Fixing America's Service Transportation Act (FASTAct). That carries the money through September 30, 2021, enabling regional planners to forge ahead with road, bridges, trail and transit projects throughout the region.

The continuing resolution passed in October puts \$10.4 Billion into the Highway Trust Fund and \$3.6 Billion into the Mass Transit Account. Had Congress not acted, the money in both funds would have run out sometime next spring.

Roughly 80% of all the money spent on Lehigh Valley transportation projects comes from federal sources.

"It really would have made it impossible to plan ahead," said longtime Pennsylvania Department of Transportation District 5-0 Executive Mike Rebert, who is now Acting Executive for District 6-0 in the Philadelphia region. "This allows things to keep moving. It allows us to continue as scheduled with the 2021 portion of the four-year program."

For the Lehigh Valley, that program includes more than 120 projects in every corner of the region, including money for Routes 22, 33 and 309, more than \$10 million for pedestrian and trail projects and funding to operate a Lehigh and Northampton Transportation Authority system that gives more than 5 million rides a year.

The 2015 FAST Act was a five-year, \$305 billion program that expired September 30. While transportation planners and community leaders would have preferred a new long-term plan, most agreed the one-year extension was the best of several options. Major transportation plans rarely pass during Presidential election years, and in the past that's often led to a string of continuing resolution extensions, some as short as one month. The options being discussed this time included three- and six-month extensions, said Erich Zimmermann, Deputy Executive Director/Director of Transportation Programs for the National Association of Regional Councils.

"Generally, it keeps next year stable, and that's good," Zimmermann said. "It's really hard to plan and spend money if you're working on three or even six-month periods."

Zimmermann, who follows federal transportation legislation closely, said even a six-month continuing resolution would not have been long enough to lead to a more permanent solution.

“There would be no chance of a new Congress taking up something that massive three months after taking office,” Zimmermann said. “At least by September, maybe they’ll be ready to take up a five or six-year bill.”

Before the continuing resolution was reached, the House of Representative had advanced a \$494 Billion five-year bill, while a Senate committee advanced a \$287 Billion, five-year bill. Neither plan reached a full Congressional vote.