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# Lehigh Valley Leading Mega-Region Plan to Control Freight Impacts

The global compulsion for online shopping has increased freight through the Lehigh Valley, causing an increasing burden on its aging infrastructure, but the impact of all those goods speeding through the region doesn't just stop when the trucks cross outside Northampton and Lehigh counties.

With that in mind, the LVPC is spearheading the creation of the Eastern Pennsylvania Freight Alliance to build a multi-regional coalition to work with state and federal agencies to better understand freight movements, so a strategy can be developed to reduce freight's impact on the transportation network, land use, environment and ultimately quality of life in nearly 400 municipalities in the alliance.

The five Metropolitan Planning Organizations joining together on the project are the Lehigh Valley Transportation Study (LVTS), Lackawanna-Luzerne Transportation Study (LLTS), Lebanon County Metropolitan Planning Organization (LEBCO), Northeast Pennsylvania Alliance (NEPA) and Reading Area Transportation Study (RATS).

They're at the beginning stages of directing a consultant to craft the Eastern Pennsylvania Freight Plan, using a grant provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation and Federal Highway Administration.

"We have had an unheard-of amount of industrial growth in a very short amount of time. So much, that industrial development has emerged as one of our largest issues," said LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley. "Our hope is to develop a variety of strategies to mitigate the many impacts we're all experiencing."

Just since 2016, Lehigh Valley municipalities have approved more than 32 million square feet of industrial development, much of it in the form of the kind of 1 million square foot warehouses built to quickly handle goods people buy daily from the likes of Amazon, Walmart and Zulily. But it's not alone in its growth.

The entire Interstate 81 corridor, spanning from Lebanon to Scranton has been surging with more freight – by truck, rail and air – as the market for online shopping and overnight delivery grows.

It is one of the few corridors in the nation within a single trucker's shift of 100 million potential consumers, and warehouse and distribution companies are racing to plant their flag before the opportunity passes. It accounts for more than 33,000 jobs in the Lehigh Valley alone.

"Freight is not just a Lehigh Valley issue," said LVPC Director of Transportation and Data Management Paul Carafides. "The Freight Alliance anticipates developing a plan that coordinates all modes for freight travel to create a robust mega-regional transportation network

that is safe, convenient, and efficiently accommodates the growing industrial sector without jeopardizing system mobility, reliability, or security. It is a large undertaking, but one which will benefit the entire region as we work to control our growth.”

The effort progressed this summer. With the federal and state support in hand, the next step included a stakeholder discussion that included Lehigh County, Northampton County, the Workforce Board of the Lehigh Valley, Lehigh and Northampton Transportation Authority, the Lehigh-Northampton Airport Authority, Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation and Lehigh Valley Industrial Parks.

And the issues that will have to be addressed in the plan are many, from matching transportation with the right land use to making sure sites have the proper infrastructure to controlling congestion and air pollution to projecting where future freight-related development might locate and how it may look.

And there are opportunities to consider other issues, such as encouraging multimodal connections and tapping into PennDOT data resources that can be useful to freight providers.

The next step will be drafting a memorandum of understanding between the five MPOs, developing a scope of work that has to be done and then hiring a consultant to help draft the plan. Along the way, LVTS will be viewing progress and adding its input into the plan.

LVTS got its first look at the effort during its regular meeting Sept 15.

“I would like to see us be involved in the planning effort,” said LVTS Technical Committee Chairman Brendan Cotter. “It’s important to make sure this not only aligns with the state freight plan, but also confronts the unique issues of our region.”

A plan is expected to be in place by the summer of 2023.