

\$4.3 Billion Draft Long-Range Transportation Plan Approved

The Lehigh Valley's Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) to invest \$4.3 billion over the next 25 years on nearly 500 road, bridge, trails, transit and community projects throughout Lehigh and Northampton counties was overwhelmingly approved by the Lehigh Valley Transportation Study (LVTS) last week.

The LRTP now goes before the Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration for review. If passed by those agencies, it goes into effect in 2024. The plan is not a budget, but a roadmap for how the region will maintain and improve its transportation network, based primarily on the federal and state transportation funding that's projected to flow into the Lehigh Valley through 2050.

That investment is a 70% increase over the money projected for this region when the LRTP was last updated in 2019, as the transportation portion of *FutureLV: The Regional Plan*. The big jump in projected money can be attributed to passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), a renewed commitment to repairing the nation's aging transportation network and an effort by state and federal officials to funnel more money into one of Pennsylvania's fastest-growing regions.

However, that regional funding is also supplemented by \$525.6 million in state and federal grant money, and funding specifically targeted for the interstate system. That brings the total money projected to flow into the Lehigh Valley by 2050 to nearly \$4.9 billion.

"This looks out 25 years to how we can invest in everything from our road and bridge network to our walking, biking and the transit system," said Becky Bradley, Executive Director of the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission, which serves as a planning staff for the LVTS. "This is a marked increase in investment over our previous LRTP just four years ago, showing the power of the IIJA. It's opened additional resources at a critical time in the Lehigh Valley's growth."

The revised LRTP, the project list with costs and timeframes, a geographic information systems map and all the public comments made can be found at lvpc.org/transportation-plans

While the money includes billions for big projects along major roadways such as Routes 22, 309, 33 and 100, and nearly 100 bridges, it also invests in smaller community projects in every corner of the region, including trail projects, streetscape renewals and

traffic safety enhancements. It also directs more than \$1.4 billion to fund operation of the Lehigh and Northampton Transportation Authority (LANATA) transit service.

Despite the big jump in funding coming to the region, the plan also outlines nearly \$2.3 billion in projects, titled “unmet needs”, that based on the current projection, cannot be funded. That could change for some of those unfunded projects if more money than expected comes in future years, or if federal or state grant money is identified.

Crafting the plan involved a robust public engagement process that included a communitywide survey taken by more than 1,000 people and 24 subregional Transportation Needs Assessment meetings designed to give all 62 municipalities, non-profit providers and regional agencies like the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, the Lehigh-Northampton Airport Authority and the Lehigh and Northampton Transportation Authority an opportunity to identify their priorities.

The LVTS set priorities on what projects made the list after a detailed scoring system was applied to every project, based on more than 40 datasets measuring everything from safety to congestion to environmental impact to cost to whether the projects would benefit underserved or disadvantaged communities.

That was followed by two public comment periods. The first 30-day period ran from September 6 through October 6, including five public meetings and an online comment system that garnered more than 70 comments.

After plan changes were required, based on comments during the first period, a second 15-day public comment period ran from October 26 through November 8, garnering 11 more comments.

Written responses were issued for all comments. The plan remains open for review at lvpc.org, and at libraries in Allentown, Bethlehem and Easton, as well as at the office of the LVPC, PennDOT in Allentown and LANATA.

The plan includes projects slated for short (2024-2028), mid (2029-2036) and long-range (2037-2050), in categories of; Bridges; Road; Road Reconstruction, Modernization and Automation; Roadway Expansion; Multimodal; Planning + Research; Safe Routes to School; Rail and Transit.

The LVTS Technical Committee unanimously approved the plan, and the Coordinating Committee approved the plan with one dissent from Chairman Lamont McClure, who as Northampton County Executive, argued the plan did not fund enough projects in his county.

The next update of the LRTP will come in 2027, but work on the four-year Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) has already begun. Unlike the LRTP, which is a roadmap based on projections, the TIP is a budget and workplan for the next four years of projects listed in the LRTP.

A public comment period for the TIP is expected to begin in May 2024.