



NORTH CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA REGIONAL PLANNING and DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

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Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Flynn, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today on behalf of the North Central Pennsylvania Regional Planning and Development Commission and the RPO who plays a pivotal role as an Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) Local Development District and one of PennDOT's key Rural Planning Organization (RPO) partners. My name is Amy Kessler, and I serve as the Community Development/Regional Planning Director, representing the six counties of Cameron, Clearfield, Elk, Jefferson, McKean, and Potter. With nearly 30 years of experience, I have witnessed firsthand the evolving transportation needs across the Commonwealth and the unique challenges faced by many of our rural communities in Pennsylvania.

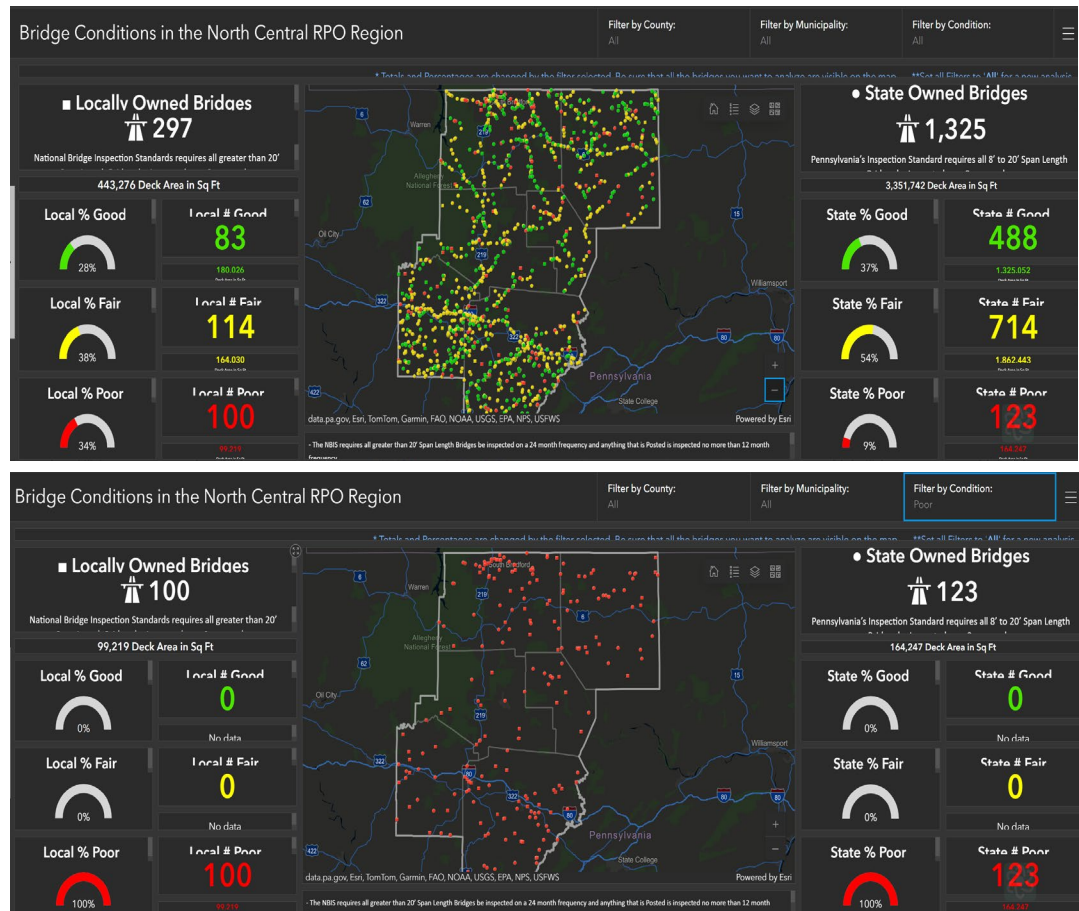
This testimony looks at the significant issues rural areas face in optimizing multimodal transportation systems, focusing on highways, bridges, public transportation, the impact of healthcare consolidation, and the capacity of local governments to access federal and state funding, including funding opportunities under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA).

Rural Transportation Challenges:

1. Aging Infrastructure:

- Rural highways and bridges across Pennsylvania are aging rapidly, particularly on our four-digit and secondary roads. Of the state's nearly **25,000 bridges**, approximately **15% are classified as structurally deficient**. Rural areas are disproportionately affected, with nearly **25% of the 7,000 locally owned rural bridges in poor or obsolete condition**, including many on secondary roadways vital to local communities. Most of these bridges were built over 50 years ago and are not designed to accommodate modern traffic demands, leading to closures and weight restrictions, which often result in long detours. Federal asset management requirements focusing on Interstates and NHS further emphasize the need to maintain and improve these critical connections, but the funding shortfall continues to make it difficult to meet these standards, particularly on those secondary and four-digit roads crucial for rural mobility and access.

○ North Central Snapshot



2. Healthcare Consolidation and Transportation Access:

- The consolidation of healthcare services in rural areas has exacerbated transportation challenges. As hospitals and clinics in rural areas close or scale back services, residents are forced to travel longer distances to access medical care. This places additional strain on rural transportation infrastructure, especially Public Transportation.
- **Local Examples:** In Pennsylvania, the consolidation of healthcare services in rural areas is clearly illustrated by the experiences of **Bradford Regional Medical Center** and **Penn Highlands Healthcare**.
- **The Bradford Regional Medical Center**, part of the Upper Allegheny Health System, significantly scaled back its services in recent years. The consolidation of services with nearby hospitals has forced residents of rural McKean County to travel longer distances to access specialized care. For many, the nearest full-service hospital is now over **30 miles away into NY**, creating barriers for those who rely on local healthcare for emergency services and ongoing treatments. This consolidation has particularly impacted the elderly and low-income populations, who may not have reliable transportation or the ability to travel far for routine or emergency care.

- The consolidation of services within the **Penn Highlands Healthcare** system has also created significant barriers for rural residents in Clearfield, Elk, and other North Central Pennsylvania counties, particularly in terms of access to transportation. As patients are forced to travel up to **60 miles** to access comprehensive care facilities, the availability of reliable transportation becomes crucial. Unfortunately, in many rural areas, transportation services are limited, especially during nights and weekends, further complicating the ability to access care in a timely manner.
- For rural residents, the lack of night and weekend transportation creates a critical gap in services. Many rely on demand-response transit systems, which often do not operate outside of regular weekday hours. This becomes a significant issue for hospital discharges, particularly when patients are released in the evening or over the weekend. Without available transportation, patients are frequently left stranded or forced to delay their discharge, which can increase healthcare costs for both the hospital and the patient. Additionally, delayed discharges can lead to unnecessary bed shortages, preventing new patients from being admitted, especially in hospitals already strained by capacity issues.

3. **Staffing Capacity in Local Governments to Access Federal Funding (IIJA):**

- One of the biggest challenges for rural local governments in Pennsylvania is their limited staffing capacity to apply for federal funding, such as through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). Approximately 40% of the IIJA funding is in the form of competitive discretionary grants. These small communities often don't have the specialized staff with technical expertise or grant-writing skills needed to pursue and manage large infrastructure grants, causing them to miss out on key funding opportunities.
- Most rural governments in Pennsylvania **serve populations of less than 5,000 people, and many have fewer than 1,000 residents**. In fact, nearly 80% of Pennsylvania's municipalities fall under this population size. With such small tax bases, these communities struggle to generate the funds needed to maintain infrastructure or hire staff to handle complex funding applications. As a result, they face significant barriers to accessing the resources necessary for critical improvements. [\(See TAC Report\)](#)
- In addition, many rural areas have large portions of their land owned by state or federal entities, such as state parks or forests. While this land provides environmental and outdoor recreation benefits, it contributes little to the local tax base. In some counties, over 60% of land is owned by the government, further limiting property tax revenue that could be used for infrastructure projects. This creates a financial gap, making it even harder for small, rural governments to raise the matching funds required for many transportation grants.
- Without the ability to generate these matching dollars, rural communities often miss out on much-needed funding to repair aging bridges, maintain roads, and improve public transit.

- Compounding this issue is the fact that rural governments also tend to have limited administrative capacity. Many lack the staff or expertise to seek out other funding sources or explore creative financial solutions. This combination of a small tax base and limited staff often leads to delays or cancellations of critical transportation projects, further isolating rural residents and slowing economic development.

In closing, I would like to once again extend my sincere gratitude to Senator Wayne Langerholc, Jr. and the members of the Senate Transportation Committee for providing the opportunity to share this testimony. The challenges faced by rural communities in Pennsylvania are certainly complex, but with continued focus and collaboration, they can be addressed through strategic investments in our transportation infrastructure. I commend the efforts of our legislature to ensure that these investments are allocated thoughtfully and effectively, keeping the needs of both residents and businesses at the forefront.

Your leadership in prioritizing transportation and infrastructure improvements is crucial to the future success of not only rural areas but the entire Commonwealth. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully Submitted,
Amy Kessler