

PennDOT Testimony: Rural Crossroads of Economy and Infrastructure

Chair Ward, Chair Flynn, and members of the Senate Transportation Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am Mike Carroll, Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) Secretary. We appreciate your continued commitment to productive conversations about sustainably funding Pennsylvania's transportation systems. The budget proposed by Governor Shapiro contains many commonsense solutions to real problems Pennsylvanians face, and it builds on much of the progress we made together last year. Thank you for your leadership as we continue this critical work.

Pennsylvania's transportation system – as well as PennDOT's responsibility – is vast. Pennsylvania has the fifth-largest state-maintained road system and the third-largest state-maintained bridge system in the nation. Public transportation exists in some form in all 67 of Pennsylvania's counties, even the most rural. Pennsylvania is also home to 120 public-use airports, 228 private-use airports, and 275 private-use heliports. More railroads operate in Pennsylvania than in any other state in the country. And more than 48 million tons of goods move through the ports of Erie, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. **Pennsylvania is host to an impressive transportation system, requiring continual investment and maintenance.**

Transportation is the backbone of our economy, is central to our quality of life, and serves as a lifeline for people in communities across the state. In our rural communities in particular, a closed roadway or bridge, or a reduction in transit services, can have serious impacts on people's lives. Every Pennsylvanian, whether they live in center city Philadelphia or the farthest reaches of Elk County, deserves access to a safe and reliable transportation network.

CURRENT ROAD AND BRIDGE INVESTMENTS

During the first two years of the Shapiro Administration, 12,921 miles of roadway have been improved, including 4,708 miles of paving: nearly 900 more miles of roadway improved and over 800 more miles paved than in the previous two years. During the same timeframe, work advanced on 1,172 state and local bridges, compared to 998 during the previous two years. Additionally, under this Administration, PennDOT and our industry partners repaired more poor-condition bridges than any other state in the nation in 2023 and improved more miles of roadway than any time in the past decade.

In 2024 alone, 5,910 roadway miles were improved statewide, including 2,186 miles of paving. In the same timeframe, work advanced on 488 state and locally owned bridges. Additionally, 509 construction contracts for highway, bridge, and other improvement projects were completed statewide through PennDOT's private-sector partners in 2024. You can track our work at www.penndot.pa.gov/results.

We're proud of the progress that we've made, but our work is far from over. **It's crucial that we continue this momentum to ensure our roadway and bridge network is safe, reliable, and efficient.**

Pennsylvania is home to a large network of state and locally maintained bridges. The average age of the 25,400 bridges in PennDOT's purview is 55 years—in many cases, nearing or exceeding their 60-year design life span. Around 250 of the state-maintained bridges move into the "poor-condition" category each year due to their age and deterioration. With a system of aging bridges, we expect this to increase. We must maintain and improve more than that number each year. If bridges are weight restricted or closed, it severely impacts commerce, emergency services, and quality of life.

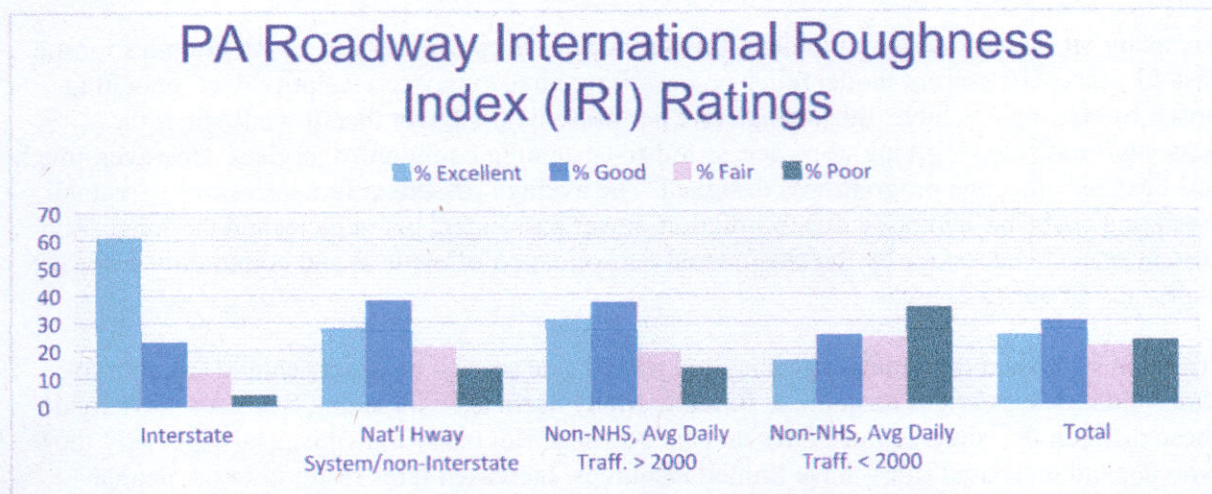
We have made considerable progress, as the number of state-owned bridges in poor condition has decreased from a high of over 6,000 in 2008 to just over 2,100 today.

Because we have a large aging bridge population, we cannot rest on this progress. In fact, we anticipate the number of poor bridges rising, as bridges we have maintained and preserved cycle back to needing full replacements or more extensive repairs. In the local system, we have 1,548 bridges that are in poor condition, so the needs extend beyond the state system.

With PennDOT directly responsible for approximately 40,000 roadway miles in Pennsylvania, maintaining our transportation network takes strong partnership among the Department, federal and local governments, planning partners, the construction industry, and our communities.

Many of the interstates in Pennsylvania were designed in the 1950s and constructed in the 1960s, and many major bridges on the interstate network are nearing the end of their useful life. The interstate system serves as the economic backbone to communities, local businesses, and interstate commerce. Though rehabilitation or replacement is costly, bridge maintenance and preservation costs only increase over time. Since this network carries 26 percent of the total vehicle miles traveled in the state, we must keep these assets in a state of good repair.

However, of the nearly 40,000 miles of PennDOT-maintained roads, nearly half see fewer than 5,000 vehicles per day. As shown on the table below, twenty-seven percent of the PennDOT-maintained roads that are not on the interstates or the rest of the National Highway System (NHS) are rated as "Poor" on the International Roughness Index (IRI). On non-NHS roadways with an average daily traffic volume of fewer than 2,000 vehicles, 35 percent of the miles are in "Poor" condition on the same scale.



Our lower-volume network is critical to our communities. While some of these roads only see a few hundred vehicles per day, they connect people to their jobs, to schools, to healthcare, to their family and friends. We will continue to prioritize this network along with our higher-volume roadways to help keep people and goods moving safely, no matter where they need to go.

And when weather events or emergencies impact our roads and bridges, we must respond immediately, regardless of whether it happens in a rural or urban community. Earlier this month, not far from here, a bridge carrying Route 219 over Piney Creek in the village of Boynton in Somerset County was heavily damaged by flooding. Within days, we began work to install a temporary bridge, which opened within a week. Around 4,700 vehicles cross this bridge every day, and while that may not seem like a lot when compared to a major bridge on an interstate, our rural bridges are critical to the communities they serve.

We're responsible for thousands of bridges across the state just like this one, and we've been just as focused on improving them as we are on our larger bridges. In those 4,700 vehicles are people going to work, trucks taking goods to market, and families taking their kids to activities - folks just living their lives. **An investment in our rural infrastructure is an investment in our rural communities, and the people who call them home.**

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Public transportation is available in some form in every county in Pennsylvania and these services are critical across the state. In fiscal year 2023-24, there were 260 million fixed-route bus trips, including 25 million trips for seniors. There were 5.2 million shared ride trips in 2023-24, most of which were for our senior citizens, people with disabilities, and low-income recipients of medical assistance.

On average, 65 percent of the people who use these services statewide say that they have no alternate means of transportation. To focus those numbers more locally, 60% of Amtran users and 70% of CAMTRAN users have no other way, other than transit, to get to where they need to go.

Focusing on shared ride for a moment, this service has been available in all PA counties for the last 40 years. The current model relies on passenger fares to pay service providers' operating costs: by sharing a vehicle, the average fare per passenger is lower than it would be if the passenger rode alone, giving users access to life-sustaining community services. However, much has changed since the program was designed. The average passenger fare necessary to recover operating costs has increased due to inflation, fewer passengers per vehicle, and the longer trip distances made necessary by the closure and consolidation of medical and community services, especially in our rural areas.

It's often suggested that transit agencies and shared ride service providers should simply raise fares and reduce services to stabilize funding. Many agencies – including SEPTA – have made these difficult decisions to raise fares and cut services. But many transit users – especially those who depend on shared ride – have limited resources. Increased fares result in fewer people riding, and fewer trips. Fewer trips mean less revenue, and the rapid decline of the system: costs per trip become unsustainable for both users and providers, as well as third-party organizations that sponsor trips, resulting in significant service cuts.

Systems that have both shared ride and fixed route have been siphoning off their fixed route revenues to fill budget gaps. This leads to increased deficits on the fixed route side, which puts agencies in the difficult position to have to cut routes for their fixed route passengers to have balanced budgets. As agencies must cut services on fixed route, more and more passengers will depend on shared ride, which only exacerbates this problem. The interconnectedness of these services is critical to providing good service to our communities, but the budgetary impacts are real.

Systems that have only shared ride have relied on the state or local governments to fund deficits that have developed. They are at the point today where a financial solution is necessary to keep service available. The alternative is to cut hours of service or limit destinations. In FY 23-24, the shared ride program deficit was \$72.8 million. This deficit was funded in the following ways:

Source	Amount
Federal Covid Relief and formula funds	\$22 million
1513 Transfer	\$33 million
1516 Service Stabilization	\$7.6 million
Local Funds	\$1.6 million
Surplus Contract Revenues	\$8.6 million

Transit offers low-cost connections to jobs, medical care, and other community resources, while reducing congestion air pollution. As you will hear from Secretary Siger, transit access and mobility are critical in businesses' decisions to locate or expand in our towns and cities. Business partnerships and adaptability are key to getting workers to jobs, especially when workers are not located near those jobs.

While transit provides millions of dollars in positive economic impact each year, ridership growth has been slow to return to pre-pandemic levels as people work from home and change their travel patterns. Additional operating funds will be critical to help agencies keep people moving safely. **This affects every transit agency across the state, not just those in major metro areas.**

The Governor's Budget proposes an additional \$292.5 million in operational funding for these critical services, split between Mass Transit Operating and Programs of Statewide Significance, which funds Shared Ride services. This would result from an additional 1.75% of the Pennsylvania Sales Tax being deposited into the Public Transportation Trust Fund. Not only would this increase help stabilize fixed route service, it will also benefit critical shared ride programs, microtransit, and more.

MOVING FORWARD

The PennDOT team works hard every day to make transportation work for all people – no matter who they are, no matter where they live, no matter how they travel.

Pennsylvania's economic growth relies on our ability to build out a transportation network that puts our people to work, strengthens our businesses, and improves lives. **To grow our economy and our communities, our roads and bridges and our public transit systems must both be properly funded.**

We appreciate your partnership as we continue in this mission.