



Upper Delaware Council

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Fiscal Crisis Hits Interstate Bridges

BINGHAMTON – The fiscal crises being experienced in New York State and Pennsylvania are forcing their Departments of Transportation (DOT) to analyze the highest priority needs to assure safe travel on the Upper Delaware River’s bridges.

The NY-PA Joint Interstate Bridge Commission held its annual meeting on May 12 at NYS DOT Region 9 headquarters in Binghamton.

Representatives of the Upper Delaware Council, Inc. (UDC) and National Park Service (NPS) Upper Delaware Scenic and Recreational River attended to hear construction and maintenance reports for the 10 bridges under the commission’s jurisdiction.

The DOT regional directors for both states painted a dire picture of money woes that are having drastic impacts on their operations.

For the first time, the commission added a new column to its Schedule of Proposed and Let Projects. It’s a category labeled as “unfunded” where red-lined expenditures that lack any previously-approved financial commitments total \$28,846,000.

“I’ve been with DOT for 27 years and I’ve never seen it like it is currently,” said Jack Williams, NYS DOT Region 9 director. “Our funding is at 61% of where we were in the past. The types of projects on our program amount to maintenance so we can spread our money where we can.”

George J. Roberts, district executive with PennDOT District 4-0 based in Dunmore, agreed from his perspective as a 26-year DOT employee.

“We have a major shortfall in dollars. We’re basically trying to figure out how to provide the same level of service with less funding,” Roberts said. “We’re putting 90% of our funds into asset management and preservation.”

Working together to conserve the Upper Delaware Scenic and Recreational River

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Both states are affected by the failure to pass a new federal transportation bill to succeed the FY 2004-2009 Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFE-TEA-LU). This creates uncertainty in how much funding they will be eligible to receive this year and for long-range planning. A one-year extender kept funding at 2009 levels.

The New York State Legislature has yet to approve a state budget for the fiscal year that began on April 1. One of Governor David Paterson's strategies to offset New York's \$9.2 billion deficit, by imposing one-day-per-week furloughs on certain state workers, is creating outrage among the DOT's ranks. The state's fiscal situation reaches beyond its own employees.

"Since March 31, all of our contractors are working at their own risk and we aren't able to pay our consultants either. In the meantime, everything is getting older and things are getting more expensive. These are the toughest times," Williams said ruefully.

In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, transportation maintenance funds have been reduced by approximately three percent and motor license fees are reportedly down.

Governor Ed Rendell's proposal (known as Act 44) to create a revenue stream for transportation and mass transit costs by implementing a toll system on Interstate 80 has been rejected three times by the Federal Highway Administration. The failure to toll the highway by 2011 will represent a loss of \$470 million state-wide, according to Roberts.

While a recent nation-wide study ignominiously ranked PA and NY as having among the highest percentages of bridges which are structurally deficient (39% in PA and 37% in NY), the DOT regional directors pledged their commitment to take care of the Upper Delaware's special crossings.

"We have a huge, unfunded amount of money involved in how we're going to address these structures, but safety will always come first," Roberts said.

"These bridges are a treasure and we'll do everything we can to manage them. Our primary mission is to keep everything safe," Williams said.

Repairs and Rebuilds

The Interstate Bridge Commission reviewed ongoing projects while essentially deferring many of its capital construction plans due to their placement in the unfunded column.

Members acknowledged that the re-routing of traffic to accommodate the \$3,242,000 major rehabilitation of the 1939 **Port Jervis, NY-Matamoras PA Bridge** has upset some motorists and local businesses.

Partially subsidized by federal stimulus funds, work began this spring to repair abutment backwalls, steel members, and the pier expansion dam, and to paint the floor beam system.

The one open lane of the bridge currently allows westbound traffic from NY to cross into PA, but those making the opposite trip of PA into NY must detour onto Interstate 84 eastbound.

Engineer Harold Hill noted that DOT did computer modeling to test various patterns and held several meetings with municipal officials and emergency management organizations to devise a solution aimed at creating the least amount of disturbance.

In mid- to late-July, Hill said that both lanes of the bridge are due to re-open westbound and eastbound. The repair project is expected to wrap up in October 2010.

A contract to paint the entire Port Jervis-Matamoras Bridge at a projected cost of \$3.4 million is earmarked for 2015.

The 1904 **Pond Eddy, NY-Pond Eddy, PA Bridge** has been under design for 15 years, according to Hill. Three million dollars has already been committed to the preliminary engineering phase, and a \$60,000 repair job is expected to begin in June. Contractors will replace missing stones on the pier nose and address issues with the underpinnings and steel plates on the historic Pennsylvania truss bridge.

While the schedule approved by the commission continues to list 2012 as the year to replace the bridge with a new one, only PA has its half of the \$9.5 million construction cost in hand currently and the environmental compliance phase remains open.

Two capital projects were tentatively approved for the 1901 **Skinners Falls, NY-Milanville, PA Bridge**. In 2011, repairs to truss members and abutments are planned for \$604,000 while a more major rehabilitation is projected in 2015 for \$8 million – though both projects are currently unfunded.

Deck replacements and additional improvements are proposed for: the 1954 **Narrowsburg, NY-Darbytown, PA Bridge** in 2012 at a cost of \$3,492,000; the 1961 **Callicoon, NY-Damascus, PA Bridge** also in 2012 at a cost of \$3.1 million; and the 1952 **Cochecton, NY-Damascus, PA Bridge** in 2016 at a cost of \$5.5 million. All three are currently unfunded.

One success story that will now come off the capital construction list is the replacement of the 1943 **Barryville, NY-Shohola, PA Bridge** at a final cost of \$11,620,000. While the bridge has been in full service since October of 2006, fabrication of the ornamental railing on the pedestrian sidewalk and overlooks was delayed. A ribbon-cutting ceremony to mark the bridge's official completion with this final installation took place on January 21 of this year.

No capital projects were cited for the **Kellams, NY-Stalker, PA Bridge**, built in 1890 with a major rehabilitation in 1990; the 1992 **Lordville, NY-Equinunk, PA Bridge**; or the 1937 **Hancock, NY-Buckingham, PA Bridge**.

Other reports delivered at the Interstate Bridge Commission meeting included:

- A summary of work completed on the 10 bridges in 2009-2010;
- General Maintenance Fund expenditures of \$239,592 from Apr. 1, 2009-Mar. 31, 2010;
- Findings from the annual inspection of the 10 bridges conducted on April 20, 2010; and
- General Maintenance Fund allocations of \$166,500 estimated for 2010-2011.

Maintenance costs include all work done on the bridge approaches, structures, and for snow and ice control, and are shared equally by NY and PA.

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