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Transportation Connects Us to the Future

By Dianne Brake

After a careful review of the NJ Turnpike Authority's proposal, which included valuable input from four former NJ Department of Transportation Commissioners Jack Lettiere, Jim Weinstein, Hazel Gluck and Lou Gambaccini, and a former State Treasurer, Sam Crane, PlanSmart NJ has decided to support the Turnpike's capital improvement plan. The improvements are to be paid for by raising tolls over time to finance transportation projects important to New Jersey's future.

The timeframe is short for the Turnpike's plan to be approved because of a December deadline for one of the most critical of these projects, the Access to the Region's Core (ARC) Tunnel. New Jersey must show the federal government that it can meet the State's portion of the \$7.6 billion cost of the Tunnel.

Other important pieces of the plan include funding for transit operations and the widening of the two major arteries that provide the lifeblood for New Jersey's economy: the Turnpike and the Garden State Parkway.

Last spring, PlanSmart NJ was disappointed when the Governor's more encompassing financial restructuring package was defeated, ending hopes that New Jersey's dwindling Transportation Trust Fund would be replenished, as is so critically needed. By some estimates the Trust Fund will be using all its money for debt service by 2010 and we will have no money to repair New Jersey's huge backlog of deficient bridges and roads.

Without replenishing the Trust Fund, we will also have no money to build an effective multi-modal transportation system that will provide the State with the growth capacity it needs, while reducing auto-dependency and decreasing the amount of Greenhouse Gas Emissions that are fueling global climate change – a frightening prospect for a coastal state like New Jersey.

Although we were disappointed that the full package is not on the table today, we are convinced that the proposal as currently framed provides the critical first steps to putting New Jersey's transportation system back on track.

In particular, the proposal does three important things that will better enable us to replenish the Trust Fund:

1. By meeting the timeframe driven by the ARC Tunnel project, it shows New Jersey is able to think and act strategically and invest in long-term outcomes for the State's transportation, economic and environmental future.
2. By taking some of the funding provided by the toll increases to support transit, it shows that we see the importance of making public transit and other means of travel as the way to grow the transportation system – investment in transit not only improves conditions for transit riders but also for drivers on less congested highways.
3. And by investing in the widening of the Turnpike and the Parkway, it shows the State recognizes the importance of goods movement and shore tourism as key engines of our economic prosperity.

The debate over this proposal is right where it should be – focused on finding solutions to the challenge of how to fund New Jersey's future transportation system. We cannot go on as we are.

New Jersey's landscape is far too developed to put highways and public transportation as competing goals. We must begin to see them as components of a multi-modal system that operates with major arteries (the limited access highways and transit rail corridors) in strategic locations, down to the tiny capillaries of local grids, jitneys and feeder systems throughout the state.

New Jersey has had enough false starts. The Blue Ribbon Commission of 2003, which had a comprehensive proposal to save transportation funding, short and long-term, was rejected by Governor McGreevey. Governor Corzine's proposal was seen as too ambitious.

Because it is ambitious to boost our economy, restore our environment, regenerate our urban centers and reduce disparities among communities – all of which are supported by investments in our transportation system – we need an ambitious plan. Even if the Turnpike Authority's plan is only the first part of a bigger, more ambitious plan, it is still essential to embrace it.

We urge decision-makers to approve this plan and get on with the long-term business of replenishing the Transportation Trust Fund in order to build for New Jersey an effective multi-modal system that will show other states how to think about and plan for transportation.

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