

**Testimony of Leslie S. Richards
Vice Chair, Montgomery County Board of Commissioners**

**Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee on
Transportation and Livable Communities**

**Whitemarsh Township Building
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Good morning. I am Leslie Richards, vice chair, of the Montgomery County Board of Commissioners, a member of the board of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority and vice chair of the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to address the Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee. We are honored that you have chosen Montgomery County in which to hold this critical hearing, and I am especially happy that you are here in Whitemarsh Township where I live and where I once served as a township supervisor.

Professionally, I am a planner and have worked in the planning and engineering fields for the past two decades. When I took office as a commissioner in 2012, I was a senior project manager at a woman-owned civil engineering firm, and managed multi-million dollar infrastructure projects such as bridge rehabilitation, road repairs, street scape improvements, trail and park development, environmental assessments, and feasibility studies, as well as writing annual and long-range strategic plans. I say all that not to tout my resume, but to underline the fact that my concern for the future of Pennsylvania's roads, bridges, infrastructure and public transportation is not rooted in partisan hysteria, but in fact, experience and knowledge.

The impressive list of speakers here today will discuss many of the specific issues facing their particular area of expertise. Mr. Burnfield of SEPTA has just outlined the daunting funding and infrastructure challenges the state's largest transit system faces in the coming years, and the dwindling financial support it has to face those challenges. Others will talk about the planning and funding that is needed to keep our region and our Commonwealth competitive and livable.

Simply put, the legislature must pass and the Governor must sign a meaningful transportation bill, or Pennsylvania will continue to watch its roads crumble, its bridges close and its public transportation systems buckle under the weight of unaddressed infrastructure problems.

Governor Corbett has put forth a transportation plan that he feels addresses the problem. Sen. Rafferty has proposed and the Senate has passed a much more robust bill. Nevertheless, both bills languish. It is my fervent hope that when the General Assembly goes back to Harrisburg this fall it will put aside partisan rhetoric as we have in Montgomery County; that it will work to craft a transportation bill that provides funding that is sufficient, sustainable, has permanent funding mechanisms and will provide a roadmap for continued funding into the future, because our infrastructure problems will not be solved by a one-time infusion of cash. We did not get into this fix overnight, and we will not get out of it tomorrow.

In Montgomery County, we are trying to do everything we can to address our infrastructure problems, but it seems that every week we close a bridge or lower the weight limit on another. Just yesterday we closed an important bridge in Lower Salford Township, and we expect that in the near future a critically important span linking Lower and Upper Providence Townships will have to close, and that closure will cause significant disruption to travel habits of residents and workers in a major employment center in the county. The resultant detour caused by this inevitable bridge closing will add miles, angst and significant fuel costs to those affected.

We have set aside over \$38 million over the next five years to address problems on our own without matching funds. We have identified a number of road and bridge projects that we will tackle with this money without the aid of state or federal matching funds. But, obviously, that will not solve our problems.

We have 133 bridges in Montgomery County, and 62 of them are functionally obsolete or structurally deficient. That is not a pretty picture, and without a meaningful influx of money, it will only get worse.

We are extremely proud of our trail system in Montgomery County, and we have transit-oriented development in municipalities throughout the county that put more and more people close to work or transportation without having to use an automobile. As Mr. Burnfield noted, SEPTA ridership is up 14 percent over the past six years and 50 percent over the last 15 years.

But, if SEPTA is unable to maintain its tracks, bridges, power stations, train stations or its aging rolling stock, all the proximity to transit will mean little if the trains aren't running often enough or at all. Take for instance, the Bridgeport viaduct that Mr. Burnfield noted in his remarks. This is a critical 3,000-foot long bridge that carries 2,400 passengers each day to and from the heavily used Norristown Transportation Center on what is known as the Norristown High Speed line. It is closed now for critical repairs and those commuters are being inconvenienced by having to take shuttle buses every day for four months. However, the 100-year-old bridge continues to deteriorate and will have to be addressed in the near future. The question is will there be money to address it properly, or will it just close?

Montgomery County, with its 800,000 residents and its 500,000 jobs, is arguably the main economic engine that powers the Commonwealth economy. It is distressing to hear some members of the General Assembly describe funding for SEPTA as welfare, or when others say that SEPTA fares should fund SEPTA's entire operating budget when cities and countries around the world understand that no public transportation system can be supported totally by fares.

If Montgomery County's and southeastern Pennsylvania's infrastructure and public transportation continue to deteriorate it will almost definitely result in a significant drag on the strongest economy in the state. Investment in this critical segment of our economy will repay itself several times over with an increase in the number of jobs, less pollution, more productive employees and in many other ways.

In a recent op-ed, Barry Schoch, Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, urged the Legislature to act on transportation funding to quote “improve our overall quality of life and deliver the world-class transportation system that Pennsylvanians expect and deserve” unquote.

While I agree with Mr. Schoch’s message, I, unfortunately, do not share his optimism about what a transportation bill would mean. The decades of underfunding our transportation needs have left us far short of a world-class transportation system. In the short term, a meaningful transportation bill would stop our slide back to 20th century status, and hopefully put us on a road towards transportation excellence, but it will take years of sustained funding to reach world class status.

My colleagues, Josh Shapiro and Bruce Castor, and I are committed to reshaping the way government does business in the county. We have committed ourselves to designing a government that concentrates on the core functions of government and we continue to strive to make sure that those core functions are delivered to our constituents in the most efficient and transparent way. In the 19 months since we took office, every vote of our board has been unanimous. Amazing, but true. That is not because we agree on everything, but it is rather a function of our commitment to finding common ground and a way forward. I would be naïve to think that that record will continue forever, but even when we do have an unfixable disagreement, I am confident that it will be characterized by cogent arguments and respectful debate.

By coming here today, taking time from your busy schedules and listening to this testimony, you, the members of the House Democratic Policy Committee have demonstrated that you are serious about finding a way to address the transportation and infrastructure challenges facing the Commonwealth. I am sure everyone testifying here today joins with me in hoping that your commitment to this is matched by a majority of your colleagues when you go back into session in September.

The economic, social and livability standards of the residents of Pennsylvania depend on that commitment. If you take nothing else from this hearing today, please take this: the problems are real; they are escalating; they will not go away without action.

Thank you very much for your time and attention.