

Lafayette Project in Jeopardy

By Keith Phucas
The Times Herald
09/22/2004

NORRISTOWN - Ongoing and future road projects - including Route 309 and the planned Lafayette Street project - depend on billions of dollars of federal assistance each year.

However, Congress failed to reauthorize the federal transportation bill before it expired Sept. 30, 2003, and the inaction has put jobs in jeopardy and delayed planning for highway and transit projects, according to American Association of State Highway and Transportation officials.

On Monday, transportation officials called on Congress to work out a compromise on the stalled federal legislation before lawmakers adjourn on Oct. 8.

State transportation departments have gotten by on month-to-month extensions since the transportation bill expired last September.

"This extension keeps us stagnant while construction costs are rising. So we're losing ground," said Allen Biehler, Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. "We also need the economic stimulus of the jobs that would be created by transportation investment."

Since Thursday, AASHTO members have been at the Pennsylvania Convention Center, in Philadelphia, for the organization's annual meeting.

The transportation group is a nonprofit, nonpartisan association representing highway and transportation departments in the 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

In 1998, Congress enacted the six-year Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), which increased federal investment in highways and transit close to 40 percent - \$168 billion for highways and \$36 billion for transit.

The boost in federal assistance has enabled states, counties and cities to repair and improve highways, fund rail service and bus fleets.

TEA-21 funding paid for 80 percent of the \$290 million reconstruction cost for the Route 202 Improvement Project, or about \$232 million. The 202 project, which was completed in 2003, widened a five-mile stretch of the highway, rebuild 24 bridges and more than 30 ramps in Upper Merion and Tredyffrin townships.

Though the Senate pushed for a \$318 billion reauthorization, recently the lawmakers agreed to support a \$299 billion funding level backed by the House and the Bush Administration.

Pennsylvania hopes to receive at least \$56.5 billion over a six-year period when TEA-21 is reauthorized.

"We're going to have to start delaying and deferring work if we don't get the bill signed," said Jennifer Gavin, an AASHTO spokeswoman.

Rep. Jim Gerlach, a member of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, said the federal funding equates to job creation.

"For every \$1 billion, there are (about) 45,000 jobs created," Gerlach said. Pennsylvania residents pay 18.5 cents for every gallon of gas they buy. According to the current TEA-21 formula, for every \$1 paid in federal taxes for gas, \$1.17 goes into the Federal Highway Fund for highway funding in the state.

However, states are reimbursed at different levels. Currently, a congressional committee is wrangling over funding levels for various states.

"The sticking point is the funding formula," he said.

Future Norristown projects that rely on federal funding include the Lafayette Street corridor project, a planned parking garage at Main and Cherry streets, and the proposed widening of Markley Street.

But Gerlach was upbeat about the legislation's prospects this year and isn't worried that the bill's delay puts these projects in jeopardy.

"I'm very optimistic these projects will get done," he said.

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