

## **The Mon-Fayette Toll Road: Background**

More than 40 years ago, a highway project was conceived to ease traffic in the then-prosperous and busy Mon Valley outside of Pittsburgh. The Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission (PTC) proposed a modern highway — a limited access toll road — that would stretch from Morgantown, West Virginia through Fayette County, and up the Mon Valley to downtown Pittsburgh. But there was no money for the project. Meanwhile, the steel industry collapsed, the mills closed and the Mon Valley went into decline. Nonetheless, the PTC continued to push ahead with the project they called the Mon-Fayette Expressway, touting it as a way to revitalize the area.

In 1991, plans for a Southern Beltway were added, intended to link the Mon-Fayette to Route 60 and the new Pittsburgh International Airport. Together, these two projects would result in the construction of 100 new miles of toll roads in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Some portions of the Mon-Fayette Toll Road have already been constructed or are in final design. But a segment connecting Route 51 to Pittsburgh and portions of the Southern Toll Road are still uncompleted and in the planning stages.

The cost to build these toll roads is currently estimated at \$4 billion, \$2.7 billion of which has yet to be secured. The PTC hopes to raise this money through a combination of state and federal earmarked funds as well as through the issuance of bonds. These bonds would have Pennsylvania taxpayers repaying close to \$7 billion over the course of 60 years. And, like other major construction projects, the costs of the toll road will continue to increase, inflating the final bill by billions of additional dollars.

Due to the uncertainties of federal funding, the current funding proposal is to raise the state gas tax by five to eight cents per gallon, and use 25 percent of the revenues specifically for the Mon-Fayette Toll Road. This means that all Pennsylvanians would continue to pay for this road every time they fill up at the pump, and pay again if they drive on it. This also means that transportation projects statewide will go unfunded for decades, as limited resources are poured into this one project. [Brunot Consulting, Inc.](#) documented the substantial costs this project will have on hundreds of priority transportation projects around the Commonwealth.

## **Problems with the Mon-Fayette Toll Road**

The Mon-Fayette Toll Road fails to address the transportation and economic development needs of the southwestern Pennsylvania region. At the same time, it will gobble up green space, create significant environmental damage, and will cost taxpayers billions of dollars. In its shadow are hundreds of miles of state roads and dozens of bridges in major disrepair, not addressed by the proposed toll road.

## **The Citizens' Plan: An Alternative to the Mon Fayette Toll Road**

On September 5, 2002 a coalition of non-profit organizations sponsored a public forum to discuss the Citizens' Plan, an alternative to the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission's plan to complete the Mon-Fayette Toll Road from Route 51 into Pittsburgh and Monroeville. This coalition, led by Citizens for Pennsylvania's Future (Penn Future), consists of Citizens for Alternatives to New Toll Roads (CANTR), Ground Zero, GASP, the Hazelwood Initiative, Oakland Community Council, Preservation Pittsburgh and the Sierra Club, Allegheny Chapter. Because coalition members believe the Turnpike Commission failed to seriously consider any alternatives in their plan except toll roads, an effort to produce an alternative plan was made. Penn Future coordinated the production of the Citizens' Plan with the assistance of local concerned individuals with expertise in the fields of architecture, engineering, transportation planning and finance as well as support from coalition members.

In January 2002, the coalition toured the major arterial roads, towns and brownfields of the Mon Valley and began to pull together a solution, drawing upon the conclusions of published regional transportation and land use studies and obtaining feedback on the first draft from local officials and community groups. The result is a 32-page outline of a Citizens' Plan.

"The plan's goal is to meet the transportation needs of the Mon Valley in ways that promote the economic vitality of existing communities, the revitalization of brownfields and the conservation of natural resources... [by developing] better road connections among Mon Valley town-centers and brownfields to stimulate economic investment and community revitalization, improved access to the existing interstate highway system for local businesses serving markets outside the Mon Valley, and superior commuting access to employment and education centers to relieve traffic congestion and further enhance economic recovery in the Mon Valley."

To meet these goals, instead of the 24-mile toll road and some park and ride lots planned by the Turnpike Commission, the Citizens' Plan proposes:

1. A 62-mile network of urban boulevards (four-lane divided roads with left-turn lanes at intersections, and upgraded traffic signals): rebuilding 52 miles of existing arterial roads such as Route 51, Route 837, Route 885, and adding 10 miles of new roads;
2. Improved connections to interstate highways such as I-70, I-76 and I-79, creating direct access from Mon Valley redevelopment sites to the interstate system;
3. Major new transit investments to reduce traffic congestion, extending light rail from South Hills Village to the Century Three area, extending the Martin Luther King Busway to Braddock and Turtle Creek, and building a new light rail

system from downtown to Oakland, Hazelwood, Homestead, West Mifflin, Duquesne and Braddock.

The total estimated cost of the Citizens' Plan is \$2.7 billion. of which \$1.2 billion is for the 62-mile road component and \$1.5 billion is for the 23 miles of new transit. For the 24 miles of toll road, the Turnpike Commission estimates a total cost of \$1.9 billion. At first glance, the Turnpike plan appears to be cheaper, but unfortunately, if the toll road is to actually serve Mon Valley communities, rather than by-passing them, part of the road component of the Citizens' Plan would have to be undertaken, and these costs are not included in the Turnpike estimate. While the road component of the Citizens' Plan could be supported by the same sources of funds as the toll road, the transit portion is eligible for additional federal funds.

Another point in favor of the Citizens' Plan is that it is incremental -- it can be carried out in stages -- while the toll road is all or nothing. In addition, because of the different types of construction in the two plans, considerably more will be spent on labor under the Citizens' Plan; that is, it will provide more construction jobs, and it is also less likely to require labor from outside this region.

The Citizens' Plan was submitted to the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission (PTC) and the Federal Highway Administration in September 2002 as part of extensive comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the toll road. Because the PTC failed to adequately develop and evaluate reasonable alternatives required under federal law, we asked these agencies to conduct a full and fair evaluation of our plan so that the public can assess how the Citizens' Plan compares to the Mon-Fayette Toll Road proposal in both meeting the region's transportation and economic needs, as well as in minimizing damage to neighborhoods, riverfronts and historic sites.

In April 2002, PennFuture released an economic analysis of the toll road. This report, A Truly Dismal Use of Public Funds: A Review of the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission's Documentation and Case for the Mon-Fayette Expressway and the Southern Beltway as an Economic Generator confirms that many of the opponents' concerns are justified. The study concludes that:

- the toll roads will hinder, not help, economic development in the depressed areas
- the toll roads will add to traffic congestion
- the toll roads are an extraordinarily poor use of public funds
- no credible case for the stimulation of economic development by the toll roads can be made
- other alternatives are much more likely to improve transportation and economic development

## **GroundZero role in the Citizen's Plan**

The GroundZero Action Network was involved in building the initial coalition of groups, organizing meetings and building a Stop the Toll Road website. GroundZero core member Jonathan Kline acted as one of the 3 primary designers of the Citizen's Plan design alternative working with local architect Rob Pfaffmann, and nationally recognized traffic engineer Walter Kulash. GroundZero worked with Penn Future over a two year period to craft responses to process documents generated by the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission.

## **Update on the EIS Process**

On December 7, 2004, Federal Highway Administration signed the Record of Decision for the PA 51 to I-376 portion of the project. The Turnpike Commission has contracted with consultants to create five Design Advisory Teams in five of the affected communities to begin the detailed process of design and right-of-way acquisition. The Turnpike Commission has only 15 percent of the 1.891 billion dollars estimated for this portion of the project—enough to acquire the properties, but none for design and construction. The Turnpike Commission estimates this next phase of work will take four years. Absent significant federal funding, the current funding proposal is an increase of as much as eight cents per gallon of the state's gas tax, with 25 percent going to fund the toll road.

PTC and the Federal Highway Administration released their evaluation of the Citizens' Plan in November 2003. Unfortunately, this evaluation contained errors and flaws. Rather than provide the public with an opportunity to examine and comment on its evaluation, the PTC holds this evaluation in its New Stanton office, as part of the technical support documents to the EIS. Access to these files is limited; New Stanton lies outside the project area, and cannot be reached by public transportation.

The PTC and the FHWA issued the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) in January 2004. The FEIS contained few substantial changes from the DEIS, and contained only a summary of the Citizens' Plan evaluation. The PTC decided that the Citizens' Plan was not a reasonable alternative to the toll road, despite the fact that its evaluation was seriously flawed, and as such decided not to evaluate the Citizens' Plan further.

PennFuture and the coalition of organizations and citizens provided substantial comments to the FEIS. Included in our comments was a report by HLB Decision Economics Inc., documenting the serious errors in the traffic demand, population, and other assumptions the Turnpike Commission used in the FEIS.