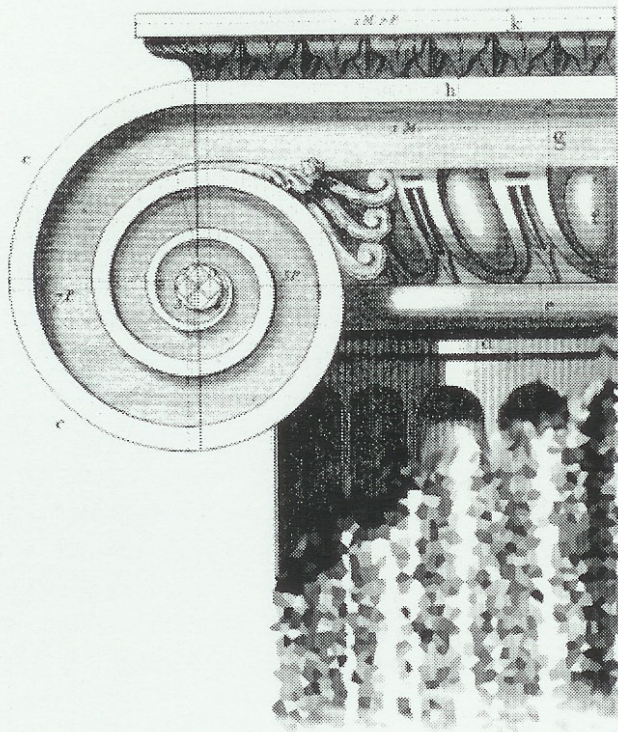


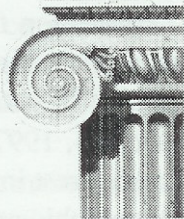
# Institute of Politics



## *Status Report:* *Transportation at a Crossroads*

*Bruce Barron*  
*May 1997*





## ***Transportation at a Crossroads***

*Institute of Politics Status Report*

*by Bruce Barron*

When we hear talk of a policy crisis in America today, most of us assume the topic is education, crime, or poverty. But transportation?

Many experts believe America's transportation system is in crisis. They see several factors—a backlog of maintenance projects, an increasing demand for new highway construction, and reduced budgets for both roads and mass transit—intersecting in a dangerous crossroads.

This possible crisis, and transportation policy issues in general, tend to get less publicity than others for at least two reasons. First, unlike a bad school or a hungry child or a drive-by shooting, the impact of transportation system problems is gradual and pervasive rather than sudden and newsworthy. Second, transportation policymaking, except for largely localized controversies over specific projects, is usually the province of experts and bureaucrats handling multimillion-dollar federal and state budgets. The rest of us, though we may wish we had more and better roads and more convenient mass transit, usually figure that the current situation generally serves our needs and that we couldn't do much to change it anyhow.

But the first of these reasons has had prominent exceptions in southwestern Pennsylvania, and the second reason is becoming outdated. The impending closure of the Fort Pitt Bridge to downtown Pittsburgh and the extended debates over proposed new roadways have highlighted the degree to which a whole region's economy and quality of life can depend on transportation decisions. And as for the decision-making process, the federal Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA, pronounced "ice tea") opened it up by requiring an enhanced level of public participation, coordinated by designated metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs).

This year is a particularly opportune time to focus public attention in southwest Pennsylvania on transportation policy choices. At the federal level, ISTEA is up for reauthorization (popularly dubbed NEXTEA). At the state level, policymakers are grappling with severe funding limitations and probing public support for various revenue-generating options, such as increasing gasoline taxes or vehicle registration fees. And locally, the Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission (SPRPC), the designated MPO for this region, is charged under ISTEA regulations with updating its long-range transportation plan during 1997. (The SPRPC currently encompasses six counties—Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Washington, and Westmoreland—as full members; it also incorporates



input from Fayette, Greene, and Indiana Counties.)

Transportation policy is not simply a matter of how to raise and designate funds; it also requires negotiation among competing visions of regional development. Some advocates of the Mon-Fayette Expressway—currently the region's most expensive and most hotly debated new highway proposal—believe this road is an essential infrastructure improvement, whatever its price tag; others would oppose its construction even if it could be built for free. Should we build more and wider roads to accommodate increasing demand, or should we let congestion force greater dependence on mass transit? Should we aid or discourage the continuing expansion of suburban developments? These conflicting perspectives underlie every contested transportation investment.

The Institute of Politics forum of January 24, 1997, on "Mass Transportation: Federal, State and Regional Priorities," illustrated the growing interest in transportation policy decisions, as the unusually large attendance represented a wider geographic area than at any forum in the Institute's six-year history. At the conclusion of that forum, moderator Rick Stafford, executive director of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, urged that the informative and important discussions of that morning be continued throughout this pivotal decision-making year.

To further encourage well-informed and broadly based participation in the process, the Institute of Politics has produced this Status Update on transportation policy. It supplements the perspectives presented at the January forum with additional background information and interviews with key state and regional leaders.

## *The Maintenance Puzzle: Are We Protecting What We Have?*

While we continue to build and contemplate more new highway improvements, is our existing system sliding into serious disrepair?

Some think so—and not only the truckers who annually pan Pennsylvania's roads in the *Overdrive* magazine poll. Pennsylvania's Department of Transportation classified 6,170 of its 16,248 bridges (or 38 percent) as structurally deficient and/or functionally obsolete in 1996; over 1,000 bridges were closed or had weight restrictions.

PennDOT vociferously refutes the popular perception that lazy workers are the problem, noting that the \$54,000 per mile it spends each year on its 44,309 miles of highways represents less than half Maryland's per-mile cost and one-seventh that of New Jersey. PennDOT has one worker for every 3.63 miles of roadway, whereas New York has one for every 1.39 miles.

In a document released last November, PennDOT states that "The build-now, pay-later mentality that nearly destroyed our highway program two decades ago has been replaced with a 'maintenance-first philosophy.'" Larry King, PennDOT's deputy secretary for planning, explains that, while the department has no formal prescription as to what constitutes a proper allocation, it has consistently directed 80 percent of available funds to maintenance over the last ten years.

Nevertheless, the backlog continues to mount, leading some to argue that even 80 percent is too low. Davitt Woodwell, director of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council's western office and chair of the SPRPC Citizens Advisory Panel, feels new-construction decisions insufficiently weight future costs: "Every time we build a new road, it soon becomes an old road that eats up more maintenance dollars." He believes the spending ratio is closer to 70/30 even before special new-construction projects are included.

King and SPRPC executive director Bob Kochanowski agree that maintenance needs alone



exceed the total pot of available money. "We could spend all we have on maintenance without doing a fully adequate job," Kochanowski says. At the same time, both defend the current balance, believing that some new construction projects also deserve immediate attention.

In the region's highest-profile bridge maintenance case—the Fort Pitt Bridge—fears of horrible congestion, not lack of money, have motivated the delay. Under severe political pressure, PennDOT pushed this bridge shutdown back from 1997 to 2000, in hopes that the Airport Busway and a new connection to downtown Pittsburgh can be completed first. This delay is not without cost: as insurance against any unexpected serious deficiency in the aging bridge, PennDOT has been forced to retain a 24-hour emergency service contractor. Says King, "The Fort Pitt Bridge is safe, but in order to keep it safe we must literally keep a constant eye on it."

State Senator Jack Wagner believes maintenance must be a top priority not only because of the restoration cost when infrastructure is permitted to deteriorate too far, but also so as to win public support for further enhancements. "If people are hitting potholes or facing undue delays due to poor signalization, they will have less confidence in their government when it asks for more money to expand the system," he says. Wagner agrees, however, that delaying the Fort Pitt Bridge restoration until the completion of several other projects to alleviate congestion is a wise investment.

Decisions on new roads and tax increases will—unless a bridge tragically collapses—continue to dominate the headlines, but maintenance must be included in the mix if we are to make responsible decisions on how much transportation funding we need and how much new construction we can afford.

### ***Transportation planning: Does it work?***

ISTEA introduced important changes aimed at improving regional transportation planning processes. This law:

- Permitted states to transfer (or "flex") monies from highway to mass-transit projects at its discretion. Pennsylvania has directed \$266 million to transit projects in this way, including \$100 million to Port Authority Transit of Allegheny County (PAT), mainly for the Airport Busway.
- Greatly strengthened the role of metropolitan planning organizations. Formerly limited to advising government agencies, the MPO is now the regional gatekeeper whose approval is needed before a region can receive federal transportation funds.
- Stipulated consideration of cost, need, congestion, and air quality in decision-making. A proposal for a new highway project must show, for example, that the level of congestion necessitates the project, that less expensive alternatives will not adequately alleviate the situation, and that air quality will not be adversely affected.
- Requires that a regional transportation plan exhibit "fiscal restraint"—i.e., that the funds needed to implement the plan do not exceed the amount anticipated to be available.

At least, that is how things are supposed to work. In southwestern Pennsylvania, the process has not always gone smoothly. The region has struggled to keep the total cost of its Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP) within assigned funding targets; last year, it did so only after PennDOT requested revisions of its first submission. Meanwhile, the Mon-Fayette Expressway project has moved forward even though some of the proposed funding sources for this road remain uncertain—which critics consider a violation of ISTEA regulations.

Any balanced analysis of transportation planning in southwestern Pennsylvania, however, must also consider the magnitude and complexity of the task. The process is seeking consensus among six



counties, a major city, and hundreds of municipalities. It must weigh the relative merits of encouraging or discouraging development in the urban core, teeming suburbs, outlying centers of new growth, county seats, depressed communities hoping for revitalization, and greenfields. People who make their living building new highways and advocates of "no-new-roads" policies compete to be heard.

As an added complication, county governments in the region, which comprise most of the SPRPC governing board, have undergone substantial shifts in leadership and in governing philosophy, forcing reconsideration of previously accepted positions. Several newly elected county commissioners view the 1994 long-range plan as insufficiently market-driven, believing it invests too much in depressed areas and fails to adequately encourage new growth.

Furthermore, planning decisions must rely on invariably uncertain future projections. Predicting population trends is hard enough—let alone unknowns such as how telecommuting will affect highway congestion or whether mass transit will gain or lose ridership. Some feel that rosy hopes and political preferences also skew the assumptions used in these projections. In December 1996 the SPRPC policy conference produced no clean agreement on the level of populations and employment forecasts that should drive the plan update process.

### *How the "man in charge" sees the process*

As SPRPC executive director both before and throughout the ISTEA age, Bob Kochanowski has had the best view of the regional planning process. Kochanowski calls ISTEA "a truly successful piece of legislation" and praises its impact even in southwestern Pennsylvania's highly decentralized governmental structure, where he believes county commissioners have risen to the task of collaborating as "regional statesmen." Having spent considerable time in Washington as co-chairman of the American Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations, he sees a strong consensus developing in favor of reauthorizing ISTEA in essentially its current form.

But Kochanowski also feels the region has a long way to go, especially in achieving fiscal restraint. He describes the long-range plan SPRPC adopted in 1994 as "a good plan on paper"—based on modest expectations and targeted growth—"but it has no teeth in it." It would require about \$15 billion in spending over the next 20 years, with no more than \$10 billion likely to be available.

"We have a long pipeline of projects with strong political support," Kochanowski says, "but nowhere near the resources to do all of them. The most critical thing we must do is decide which projects are most important and then deliver the resources to complete them."

To address this problem, as well as the call to incorporate market imperatives, SPRPC has introduced an "opportunity area" process as part of this year's long-range plan revision. In eleven areas of potential growth within the region (beyond the airport area, Cranberry, and New Stanton, which were already identified as growth sites in the 1994 plan), local leaders involved in Assessment Task Forces will have the chance to present their case to the SPRPC board, which will ultimately decide on a priority ranking.

The process is a delicate one, as the board empowered to make collective judgments is itself comprised of persons with vested and more localized interests. But Kochanowski hopes the increased citizen involvement resulting from the opportunity-area approach and other means will help SPRPC make wise policy decisions based on true regional priorities.



## *Other perspectives differ widely*

Others with a substantial investment in southwestern Pennsylvania's planning process and its results tend to speak favorably of ISTEA while expressing varying degrees of satisfaction with SPRPC's structure and its clout. The most frequent concern has been that SPRPC's board composition, dominated by county commissioners and city officials, leaves almost everyone else feeling underrepresented.

Bruce Ahern, executive director of the Beaver County Transit Authority, served on the SPRPC board from 1993 to 1995 and recalls his first meeting, at which he discovered he and Bill Millar (then PAT executive director) were the only representatives of mass transit on a 40-person commission. "We looked at each other and Bill said to me, 'We have them surrounded,'" Ahern recalls. He believes SPRPC should have altered its structure in response to the intermodal mission it received from ISTEA.

Marilyn Skolnick, state transportation chair for the Sierra Club and a former PAT board member, believes SPRPC lacks adequate grass-roots participation to constitute equitable representation of the region's views. Lou Oliva of Grubb and Ellis, western Pennsylvania chapter president of the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties, agrees, though his main concern differs from Skolnick's. Not only does business lack direct representation on the SPRPC board, but Oliva sees its Citizens Advisory Panel as dominated by "a vocal minority opposed to growth."

Joe Kirk, who as head of the Mon Valley Progress Council has led the drive for the Mon-Fayette Expressway, also finds the public-participation process skewed: "The people who generate jobs don't go to public hearings, but we still need them at the table."

The other common complaint is that SPRPC cannot implement its good intentions, due mainly to the region's decentralized government structure and the power municipalities wield in land-use decisions. Skolnick says local land-use authority means "we are trying to solve the problem of inadequate transportation with one arm tied behind our back." Woodwell believes the state's municipal planning code should be amended to require consistency among levels of government and thereby integrate land-use with transportation policies.

On the other hand, Oliva believes SPRPC should be "more an advocate for how we can do things rather than why we can't." Similarly, Kirk believes the ISTEA process artificially hinders development of large projects with high cost but high regional significance: "If ISTEA had existed in the 1950s we'd still be driving on two-lane roads." While he believes SPRPC's opportunity-area approach may be helpful, Kirk also fears that it could cause advocates to coalesce around projects benefiting smaller geographic areas rather than those of regionwide importance.

## *Differing visions*

Consensus-building is so difficult because the participants come to the table from multiple, often seemingly incompatible starting points—not just two opposing positions as in many negotiations.

For Wagner, public opinion is an essential starting point. "Ask people what they consider our main transportation problems," he says, "and they will say most often that they want the bottlenecks addressed on the Parkway West, route 28 north, and at the Squirrel Hill Tunnel. None of these three bottlenecks is satisfactorily addressed by our current transportation plan."

For Oliva, regional economic growth is the key, leading to a much different prioritization of projects. He says the lack of immediate access from developable land to major highways is a primary reason why Pittsburgh is unable to compete with other markets for new development. Oliva sees comple-



tion of a full interchange where Interstate 79 and the Parkway West intersect is crucial to spur growth in the airport corridor: "Letting any project go forward before that one is an injustice to the region." He considers the Southern Beltway important and improvements to route 28 relatively superfluous: "The communities along route 28 are well developed already. That money could be better spent than saving five minutes off commuter trips."

Skolnick presents yet another set of priorities: preventing inefficient urban sprawl, relieving congestion, and reducing dependence on automobiles. "County commissioners want as much development as possible, but I wonder if their residents do. People keep telling me they don't want their communities to become another Monroeville," says Skolnick, herself a Monroeville resident. She faults heavy reliance on real-estate taxes for goading public officials to attract new development as the main way to expand their tax base.

SPRPC planning documents reflect a heavy emphasis on using transportation improvements to reduce the total number of hours motorists lose due to traffic delays. But Oregon congressman Earl Blumenauer, for 20 years a driving force behind Portland's nationally acclaimed regional planning, painted a strikingly different urban vision, featuring forced reductions in auto travel. In 1975 Portland, faced with demand for more downtown parking, instead placed a cap on the number of spaces, even tearing out a three-story garage to create a city square.

### *Where does mass transit fit?*

Mass transit provides approximately three billion trips a year for the 80 million Americans who lack private transportation due to age, physical condition, or finances. PAT gives 75 million rides a year, with roughly another 1.5 million riders using the region's three other systems: Beaver, Westmoreland, and Mid-Mon.

While our growing elderly population and the new emphasis on moving welfare recipients to work will increase the need for mass transit, the funding situation is, if anything, tighter here than with regard to highways. The federal investment of \$4 billion per year nationwide is slated for sharp reduction, and Governor Ridge has proposed a cut in state aid. Gas tax and vehicle registration fee increases can't solve transit's woes either, for the state constitution requires that funds raised from highway-related sources be spent on highways. As a result, transit officials insist that their prospective funding shortfalls are the most imminent of the various potential transportation crises.

State Representative Dave Levdansky says mass transit gets short shrift because its voice in Harrisburg is dwarfed by the new-highway construction lobby, and that it would be even more neglected if not for legislators from Philadelphia and Pittsburgh for whom transit is a priority. Wagner agrees that mass transit receives inadequate attention and believes the state should require regions to develop a comprehensive transit plan that connects regional centers, rather than a set of unrelated plans by individual counties.

Ahern also agrees that transit has lacked an effective presence in Harrisburg but hopes that situation will change with the creation of the Pennsylvania Public Transit Association, which has united two separate organizations and will represent all transit operators in the state. To illustrate the result of transit's weak advocacy, Ahern noted that, although a state task force in 1994 recommended nearly equal funding increases for highways and transit (\$375 million and \$320 million a year, respectively), the package debated at the end of the 1996 legislative session would have given \$425 million to highways and just \$75 million to transit.

"When you're trying to feed two starving mouths, it becomes extremely difficult," PennDOT's



Larry King says. Although, as of September 1996, PennDOT had “flexed” \$266.6 million of ISTEA money to mass transit, King notes that \$200 million of that came in a single year and that the amount for this year is only about \$20 million. Any increase in that amount, he says, would have to originate at the regional level: “If there were a groundswell from MPOs wanting to flex more money, we would be hard pressed not to honor it.”

PennDOT Secretary Brad Mallory, addressing the Institute of Politics forum in January (before Governor Ridge released his budget), suggested that funding reflects the level of demand for transit. “In Europe and Japan, mass transit grew because of massive government support and high gas taxes,” Mallory said. “Because fewer people here use mass transit, the pressure to improve its service is less.”

Some development decisions clearly affect transit’s future for better or worse—for example, whether a new office building is situated adjacent to a rail line or surrounded by massive parking lots. From a pro-transit perspective, Ahern objects strongly to current development patterns in the airport corridor: “We are cutting off the tops of hills and putting buildings on them. There is no way for any mode of transportation other than autos to serve these buildings.”

Oliva, whose constituency is a common target for criticism that its market-driven approach could decimate transit’s viability by promoting scattered development, disagrees. “If we listen to where the market wants to go, mass transit may be the beneficiary,” he argues, and he considers public transit to Pittsburgh’s airport an important need. At the same time, he says that if Pittsburgh wants to grow it must accept and respond to the reality that Americans prefer convenient drives to suburban office locations with free parking.

## *Financing: A Few Billion Short of a Load*

At the SPRPC’s downtown Pittsburgh offices, able transportation planners diligently translate regional priorities and cost estimates into intricate documents indicating the timetable for dozens of proposed improvements. Their impressive productions would be even more valuable if they knew the money to turn these plans into reality will be available. That’s the big “if” in current transportation planning.

The Pennsylvania State Transportation Advisory Committee, in its December 1994 report entitled “Investing in Pennsylvania’s Transportation Infrastructure,” recommended increased spending of \$726 million a year (\$375 million on highways, \$320 million on transit, and \$31 million on rail and aviation). The committee identified 20 possible revenue sources but did not recommend any preferences among them.

Discussions of gas tax and vehicle registration fee increases percolated through 1996, but raising the gas tax remained unpopular even though revenues have actually declined due to greater fuel efficiency. Extended negotiations finally led to passage in April 1997 of an additional gas tax of 3-1/2 cents and an increase in vehicle registration fees (from \$24 a year to \$36 for most motorists).

PennDOT estimates that these new levies will raise about \$400 million a year, which is to be split between maintenance and new construction. Southwestern Pennsylvania’s share of that money would restore about half of the funding reduction within which SPRPC had to work in preparing its 1996 four-year transportation plan.

The General Assembly’s action will ease but not end the transportation funding squeeze. Kochanowski, a strong supporter of increased funding (“We could spend a 20-cent gas tax increase on our regional plan”), says expanded public awareness of transportation benefits could help to make tax or fee increases more palatable, as would linking the new money with specific local projects being completed with those funds.



## *Calling all localities: Chip in!*

The financial squeeze has forced renewed consideration of local participation in transportation funding—an item largely forgotten when money flowed more freely, the federal government covered 80 or 90 percent of the cost of major improvements, and the state picked up the rest. Currently the most notable example is in Cranberry Township, where relieving congestion at the confluence of four highways (Interstates 76 and 79, Routes 19 and 228) is a high-priority project with a high price tag.

Unable to allocate the full \$82.5 million needed for this project out of the \$850 million available for its four-year transportation plan, SPRPC reserved \$32 million and recommended that the Turnpike Commission (through a toll surcharge) and the affected communities (through a dedicated tax on new development) cover the balance.

“The Cranberry people feel blackmailed, but we do not have the resources to program \$80 million for one project,” Kochanowski says. “Either the three pieces fit or we lose the project.”

Butler County Commissioner Jim Kennedy has spearheaded an effort to achieve a collaborative funding plan for the Cranberry connector. On the issue of municipal and county financing participation, he says, “This project will benefit Cranberry and Butler County as well as truckers, and we have to get projects like this one on track and completed in my lifetime, not my grandchildren’s.”

Some believe it should be standard practice for a community that will reap benefits from an infrastructure improvement to share in the cost. Oregon congressman Blumenauer told the January Institute of Politics forum that “We have been timid about capturing the value of public investment” and recommended levies on utilities and developers moving into an area where new road construction has enhanced the location’s value.

## *Where else should we look?*

Among advocates of greater transportation spending, the federal transportation trust fund, whose \$30 billion surplus is currently applied to deficit reduction, makes an appealing source. Congressman Bud Shuster, who chairs the U.S. House transportation committee, hopes to win release of this money, but his wishes collide with those of deficit hawks in his own party.

Supporters of opening the trust fund, such as Wagner, believe money raised from transportation taxes should be spent on transportation and that spending the trust fund in this way would provide “an incredible positive boost.” In contrast, Levdansky asks rhetorically, “Does oil exist in the earth only to fund automobile transportation and new highway construction interests, or to support a larger set of public needs?”

Woodwell, though reluctant to support new roads, acknowledges that more money is needed for maintenance, upgrades, and public transit. He favors user fees and “congestion pricing” (setting tolls that vary depending on how heavily a road is used), a relatively novel approach that new highway technologies could make easier to implement.

Woodwell objects, however, to raising funds on a statewide basis for specific local projects—a solution preferred by Kirk, who had wanted 1 cent of the new gas tax to be dedicated to completing the Mon-Fayette Expressway.

Ahern urges a dedicated tax for mass transit as an improvement over the “mishmash” of modest taxes (including levies on car rentals and magazine purchases) the state legislature passed in 1991. He points to Lake County, Ohio, east of Cleveland, where a 1/4-cent sales tax covers 75 percent of transit’s



operating expenses, as a model.

The SPRPC held a conference in June 1996 to educate regional leaders about the widening gap between desired improvements and available funds as well as to solicit their suggestions. The conference generated few new solutions—although one discussion group suggested that if any issue could motivate the cooperation necessary to create a regional tax, it would be transportation—but participants did call for SPRPC's leadership "to educate the public about the region's transportation financing crisis and the important relationship between good transportation, economic development, and region's quality of life."

### ***Key funding facts:***

- Pennsylvania's gas tax now ranks fifth-highest in the nation at 25.85 cents per gallon.
- On the other hand, Pennsylvania's passenger car registration fee of \$36 is still among the 15 lowest in the nation even after this year's increase (the first in 20 years). Rhode Island's fee is \$1,317!
- Pennsylvania is a "donee" (as opposed to "donor") state, in that it receives more money for transportation from the federal government than it pays in—about \$1.16 for every dollar contributed.
- The federal government spends about \$20 billion a year, or \$80 per person, on all forms of transportation.
- The Puget Sound Regional Council (the MPO for Seattle-Tacoma), in a 1995 report, argued that the actual costs of transportation—taking into account everything from auto repairs to road maintenance and transit subsidies—totaled 25 percent of that region's personal income.

## ***A Case Study: The Mon-Fayette Expressway***

The \$2 billion question of whether to build a Mon-Fayette Expressway offers considerable food for thought, not just on the expressway itself but on the adequacy of the process by which this and other transportation policy decisions are reached.

Pennsylvania's General Assembly authorized the Turnpike Commission to pursue this project, which would ultimately connect Interstate 68 in West Virginia with Interstate 376 east of Pittsburgh, in 1985. The project has been divided into four sections. Two portions of superhighway are already in use south of Interstate 70, but the northern sections—from Interstate 70 north to Pittsburgh—remain in the planning stage.

In accordance with ISTEA requirements, a Major Investment Study (MIS) on the northernmost section, whose southern terminus is at Route 51 in Jefferson Borough, was initiated in 1994. The SPRPC approved the report, which recommended continued consideration of the road, last September. But opponents have not abandoned the battle.

An SPRPC citizens' advisory panel report noted that proponents and opponents disagree on how the Mon-Fayette Expressway would impact land use, economic development, and the environment, as well as on whether the need justifies the expense (now estimated at over \$1 billion for the northernmost section and over \$2 billion for the whole project). It summarized panel members' views of the project and of the proposed Southern Beltway, which would connect the Mon-Fayette to Pittsburgh International Airport, as follows:

"One group of Task Force members is strongly in favor of both Turnpike toll roads, mainly on the grounds that they will bring development and jobs to the region, especially the Mon Valley. They



believe the Mon Valley has waited a long time for better roads, that things will only get worse if we don't act now, and that money can be found to build the roads if we try hard enough.

"A second group of members is just as adamantly opposed to both Turnpike toll roads, not because they oppose bringing jobs and development to the region, but because they believe these projects are the wrong way to do it. They believe upgrading existing roads would be cheaper, more effective and much better socially and environmentally."

Expressway opponents complain that the project should not have progressed this far (to Step 5 in a designated ten-step planning process) without specifying funding sources. The heavy dependence on special federal funds, creation of a state infrastructure bank, private-public partnerships, and "bonding of user fees or other dedicated funding" has raised questions as to whether the MIS meets the ISTEA requirement of including "a clear and reasonable financial strategy" for the project.

State Representative David Levdansky, who has strongly opposed the Mon-Fayette section between Route 51 and Interstate 70, believes the MIS violates ISTEA by engaging in "wishful political thinking, certainly not grounded in any legislative reality." On the MIS's projection of \$200 million in federal demonstration funds, he stated, "The Turnpike Commission and SPRPC to believe the Shuster-Eppard political/lobbying juggernaut will deliver any and all necessary funds from Congress."

Levdansky feels the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission's role as lead agency for the Mon-Fayette project also violates ISTEA by limiting the options to be considered. "ISTEA says that, once you have proved there is congestion, you must study the full range of options," Levdansky explains. "But the Turnpike Commission is not going to say upgrades or light rail is the best solution, because it has a vested interest in building toll roads." Levdansky believes that required congestion studies have been omitted or ignored when they would not favor building the expressway.

In contrast, Joe Kirk of the Mon Valley Progress Council sees the Mon-Fayette Expressway approval process as "the first major test case of ISTEA in the nation, and it showed we can comply with ISTEA requirements." The fact that the project has received its impetus largely from outside SPRPC and the ISTEA process represents, to Kirk, "a recognition that major new initiatives have their roots not in a bureaucratic process but in the will of the community." But he also sees the Mon-Fayette's progress thus far as a model of a major project that can gain approval through the MPO process.

While asserting that the MIS met all federal requirements, Kochanowski acknowledges Levdansky's skepticism of the proposed financing. "The Mon-Fayette Expressway is a classic example of how ISTEA imposes itself on previous processes," Kochanowski says. "It's a project with a 25-year history of support, which many see as the salvation of the Mon Valley, but it has to fit into the regional plan and we have no way to finance it."

Kirk is more sanguine about funding prospects—expecting, for example, that it will be easier to secure federal funds for a road that will generate tolls to pay for its own maintenance. He finds it ironic that, after areas like the North Hills and Butler County have reaped enormous benefits from non-toll highways, the depressed Mon Valley should have to fight so hard to win construction of a toll road.

Kirk believes the Mon-Fayette project is crucial from the perspective of regional development: "If we don't grow this region as a whole your children will still be moving elsewhere." This debate is also important to the whole region because (although the project has attracted some special demonstration funds) much of the expenditure on this expressway could become money unavailable for other southwestern Pennsylvania projects. Depending on the result, the debate could become even more shrill as the region's leaders contemplate the Southern Beltway, the Crows Run Expressway, and dozens more projects now listed on SPRPC's long-range plan.



## *Planning for a New Regional Age*

Lou Oliva recalls the recent SPRPC meeting at which a Beaver County delegation presented its wish list of desired projects but then said that it would be willing to defer all its other requests if it could just gain approval for the Crows Run expressway. "Here's a group that is being visionary rather than greedy," Oliva thought to himself. As he sees it, "We cannot afford now to satisfy elected officials' political desires with projects with minimal impact on the region. When the region grows, we'll have the money to do more."

Oliva's praise of that example echoes a consistent theme heard from almost every participant in transportation planning: with funding streams tight and the ISTEA process forcing broader collaboration, regionwide consensus and united advocacy are the only way to succeed.

Getting so many discrepant voices to sing in harmony may seem a daunting task, but there are signs of hope. The persons interviewed for this report did not universally support Bob Kochanowski's perception of increasing regional statesmanship. But across geographical, professional, and ideological lines they agreed that the full range of interests must be better represented in planning discussions; that transportation decisions must serve to advance regional economic development; and that good mass transit availability benefits everyone in the region, not only the people who use transit.

To some, the existing processes may already seem burdensome and bureaucratic. But others believe a greater dedication to dialogue could reap major dividends. Bruce Ahern was struck by the all-day, community-wide transportation forums Portland has held; "I don't think we have had any meaningful dialogue of that magnitude here," he says. And he is hopeful that such discussions can bring frequently opposed parties onto common ground: "If transit is going to be successful it must be tied more closely to economic development, and we can't do that without having developers at the table. We can have a meaningful debate and come out, hopefully, with some consensus."

Jack Wagner believes transportation policy suffers unfortunate neglect not only by the general public, but by most elected officials. "Before I entered government I never appreciated the complexity or the importance of our transportation system," he says. "The interrelationship between efficient transportation and economic growth cannot be overemphasized."

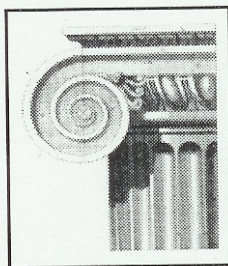
Adds Kochanowski, "Transportation decisions affect everything from quality-of-life concerns to welfare reform. That's why they are so difficult—and so important."

Transportation may take a major step toward the center of regional conversations when Alcoa transfers its downtown office building to SPRPC's parent organization, the Southwestern Pennsylvania Corporation, as a hub for development activities. (The SPC also includes an economic-development arm, known as the Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Development Council or SPRDC, but SPRPC's transportation planning role is the corporation's largest activity.)

The floor is open this year for input into transportation decisions that will significantly shape this region's future. The message that both our highway and transit systems need urgent attention is getting more frequent expression. The months ahead will show who is listening.



**Institute of Politics**



University of Pittsburgh  
2310 Cathedral of Learning  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15260  
Telephone: 412-624-1837  
Fax: 412-624-6323