KEYSTONE TRANSPORTATION FUNDING COALITION CALLS FOR TRANSPORTATION FUNDING
By Steve Cline

The Keystone Transportation Funding Coalition held a press conference this morning to push for multimodal solutions to Pennsylvania’s transportation needs. Coalition members, made up of labor unions, health care providers, businesses, trucking interests, the elderly, bike and pedestrian trail supporters, farm organizations, air and sea ports and people with disabilities, voiced their collective support for a comprehensive funding solution.

The proposed funding plan includes an additional $3.5 billion infrastructure investment in 2011, which is the level of funding recommended by the State Transportation Advisory Committee’s Transportation Funding Report, known as the “TAC Report,” as adopted by the State Transportation Commission in May 2010. Additionally, the funding plan recommends an additional $2 billion investment in 2011 with inflation sensitive levels of funding for 2012, 2013, 2014 and culminating in a total of $2.2 billion in additional annual funding by 2015.

Rep. Richard Geist (R-Blair), Chairman of the House Transportation Committee, stated that the “problem is absolutely for real.” Pennsylvania has an increasing number of miles of distressed roads and has only half of the funds needed to fix interstates and is receiving only 70 percent of its federal transportation funding, he said.

“Pennsylvania needs an infusion of capital,” Rep. Geist declared. He noted that he, along with Rep. Joseph Markosek (D-Allegheny), have been championing this cause. Rep. Geist acknowledged that a study has been commissioned by Governor Tom Corbett, but he voiced his opinion that action needs to be taken now.

Calling the coalition members present at the press conference a “true power lineup,” George Wolff, the founder of the Keystone Transportation Funding Coalition, explained that Pennsylvania’s public transit organizations, the highway construction industry, labor unions, and businesses, among others, are “all one integrated intermodal transportation system.” He added that the Coalition congregated to hear from users, meet with legislators and spread the message that transportation issues affect all Pennsylvanians.

Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Rob Wonderling thanked Rep. Geist for his efforts on the issue and noted that as a former state Senator he is aware that comprehensive funding is “long, long overdue.” Wonderling cited 1997 as the last year of major infrastructure investment. In the Philadelphia metro area, three key aspects determine its’ attractiveness to businesses; having a qualified workforce, having an entrepreneurial component and mobility. Wonderling commented that mobility is absolutely critical and he offered the example of Rt. 422 having an average backup of 11 to 12 miles during a normal workday. “Enhanced mobility” is key for a robust economy and the “Chamber will not shy away from” issues such as user fees, tolling and private-public partnerships. “The legislature needs to step up and not rely on federal monies,” Wonderling concluded.

Dick Sterner, an AARP volunteer from Mechanicsburg, noted that accessible and affordable transportation is a crucial concern for senior citizens. 60 percent of seniors do not have public transportation access within 10 miles of their houses and without reliable transportation, and can be isolated, he said. Pedestrian safety is also an important issue, he added. Sterner commented that Pennsylvania should not attempt a “shortsighted makeup” of transportation funding, especially since the I-80 tolling plan has been rejected.
Joe Machek, President and CEO, 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania, called transportation funding both a core issue and core responsibility. The state receives an immediate return on its investment, private investments can be leveraged and living wage Pennsylvania jobs that cannot be outsourced will be created, he said.

“Not all the news is dire,” Machek commented, however. PennDOT has made strides and Allegheny County has saved over $50 million since Act 44 was passed, he said. Pennsylvania leads the nation in efficient spending of federal stimulus dollars. He noted that the proposed funding plan would save on future maintenance costs. “The more the system decays, the more it costs to repair,” he said. “Let’s act now,” Machek emphasized.

President and CEO of Pennsylvania Industries for the Blind and Handicapped, Gary Crowell, explained that persons with disabilities rely heavily on state programs such as the Shared Ride program for paratransit. A 6 percent increase in demand for those programs is projected every year. In the $2.2 billion funding plan, only $40 million is being asked for this issue. “Small amount but big spend,” Crowell remarked. “Budget cuts should not be allowed to override social responsibility.”

William McLaughlin, Director of Governmental and Public Affairs at the Philadelphia Regional Port Authority, noted that this was the first time that the Philadelphia Regional Port Authority has been included in this funding plan discussion. He explained that the Philadelphia Regional Port Authority handles 6 million tons in cargo every year. McLaughlin commended Rep. Geist for his vision on the “inter-connectiveness” of transportation.

Pat Tomes, with the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, commented that families are spending 30 percent of their income on transit expenditures. Active transportation, such as walking or bicycling, constitute 12 percent of all trips, a 25 percent increase since 2001, she noted. Funding for active transportation represents a good value on investment and can reduce the overall transportation load. In 2008, rising gas prices contributed to an overall drop of 3 percent in auto rides and a 30 percent peak hour traffic congestion decrease. Tomes also voiced her support for the 2008 PennDOT smart growth program.

Representing the United Transportation Union (UTU), Don Dunlevy, UTU State Legislative Director and Chairman, spoke regarding how Pennsylvania is still benefiting from the initial infrastructure investment in Amtrak, SEPTA and in the Keystone Rail and Keystone Corridor. After Amtrak and PennDOT partnered in 2004, overall ridership increased from 600,000 to over 1 million. $265.4 million in Amtrak funding resulted in $161 million in wages for rail and transit workers, he added. Outside of the corridor, in areas such as the Allegheny mountains, there are challenges such as terrain, freight versus passenger lines and high-speed system limitations. Dunlevy stressed that a better rail system would create a lot of jobs and build a stronger commerce economy. He also voiced his hope that public hearings would be held on these issues.

Dave Kilmer, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Public Transit Association, explained that public transit are facing difficult times. Buses and infrastructure are needing replaced or repaired. Raising tolls impacts riders, Kilmer acknowledged. “It is tougher for us to survive,” he said.

Transportation issues “affects everyone,” Executive Vice President of the Associated Pennsylvania Constructors, Robert Latham stated. The proposed funding plan would fund a better quality of life, according to him.
Wolff ended the press conference by telling a story about how a bridge is so bad that a school bus cannot cross it with kids inside the bus. The kids have to get out and walk across the bridge, he explained. “A lot of people depend on public transit,” he concluded.