

**Allegheny Conference / Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce
Senate Transportation Committee
Port Authority of Allegheny County Board Room
October 7, 2015
Ken Zapinski**

Good morning, I am Ken Zapinski, senior vice president for energy & infrastructure for the Allegheny Conference on Community Development. I am appearing today on behalf of the Conference and the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce, one of our operating affiliates. We appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to talk about resource challenges and innovative changes to the local transportation system.

Any discussion of transportation in Pennsylvania has to start with a heartfelt thank you to this committee and your legislative colleagues in the Senate and House for the leadership you showed in passing the Act 89 transportation funding reform bill two years ago.

As you know, suitable infrastructure investment is critical for a strong economy and strong communities. But prior to Act 89's passage, the civic discussion was all about how Pennsylvania is falling farther and farther behind in its transportation investment. That's not a positive and welcoming message to send to businesses thinking about investing.

But things have changed since Act 89. We now have a reliable revenue stream to support a multi-modal network of highways, bridges, rail, transit, and ports. There is always more to be done, but Pennsylvania is no longer in crisis mode and can afford to start imagining a different transportation future.

Given this setting, it seems most appropriate to focus on public transit and the Port Authority. Maintaining a robust and financially stable Port Authority in Allegheny County was of critical importance to the business community because of the vital role transit plays in supporting the regional economy – half the workers Downtown and 25 percent of those in Oakland rely on transit to commute, and we could not have afforded to have the Port Authority fail.

That is why the Conference worked with partners around the region and across the state to reform Port Authority operations, bring its wage and benefit structure under control, and redesign the system to support a 21st century economy.

Regrettably, part of the work included trimming routes and service hours that the Port Authority's revenue base could not support. They were painful cuts that hurt many riders, but they were cuts that were necessary to build a system that was could sustain itself financially.

With the passage of Act 89 and the “new” money it brought, many communities are clamoring for their old service to be restored. What they don’t realize is that the Act 89 money was just enough to maintain the current, slimmed-down system with very few dollars to expand service.

The tales of pain from people and communities cut off from transit service are genuine and heart wrenching. And it would be easy and feel good to say “yes” to those service requests, to address that pain.

But the Port Authority and PennDOT must look very carefully at any service expansions, agreeing only to those that don’t jeopardize the system’s long-term financial stability. It’s a difficult path to tread, but it’s absolutely necessary.

One way to expand the system is to attract new riders by enhancing and improving the customer experience. That was the conclusion of a panel of Urban Land Institute experts who studied the Port Authority last year. The ULI called attention to aspects such as using technology to help riders know when their bus is coming, improving shelters, and making things easier for riders with things like the Connect Card. The Port Authority, Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald and their partners are tackling many of these issues.

But the ULI also focused on softer aspects such as the cleanliness of vehicles and courtesy of drivers and other workers. “Any transit system needs to develop a customer service culture focused on achieving five-star service for the customer,” the panel concluded. We agree.

One plan for improving the rider experience is to introduce enhanced bus service – Bus Rapid Transit – in the corridor between Downtown and Oakland. The objective is to create a seamless, customer-friendly style of bus service between those major employment centers that will help attract investment to revitalize the neighborhoods along the route, bringing jobs and new residents who want to be located conveniently to the entrepreneurial activity and innovation in Oakland as well as the corporate service sector Downtown.

But local transportation is more than just transit and the Pittsburgh region is more than Downtown, Oakland, and adjacent neighborhoods. That is why the Allegheny Conference is organizing an effort to take advantage of this moment to ask residents of Southwestern Pennsylvania to imagine what their transportation future might look like.

The Conference helped launch the Regional Transportation Alliance, a public-private initiative with a steering committee consisting of a public-sector and a private-sector representative from each of the 10 counties plus the City of Pittsburgh. The Alliance is led by co-chairs Steve Craig, Lawrence County Commissioner and the outgoing chairman of SPC, and Brian Heery, a Butler County resident who is president of Mitsubishi Electric Power Products in Warrendale.

The first project of the alliance, begun last week, is a massive crowdsourcing exercise to ask stakeholder groups across the region to identify the top transportation problems that their business, or social service agency, or arts group, or students, encounter each day, along with their suggestions on how to solve it.

The Alliance will spend most of the rest of the year collecting that input before the steering committee will begin discussing the findings in January. After sharing the ideas and gathering input from experts and others around the region, including elected officials, the idea is to have a vision document to present to the public to try out sometime in 2016.

It's too early to tell where this process will eventually lead, but if the region is to have a different and more robust transportation future, we have to start imagining what that might look like. And this crowdsourcing is the first step down that path.

Thank you for this opportunity today, and I would welcome any questions you might have.