

Formal Written Testimony of PA Turnpike CEO Mark Compton
Joint Committee Hearing — Senate & House Transportation Committee
July 14, 2015

Virtually every decision we make at the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission is guided, to some extent, by our concern for the safety of our customers and employees. And for good reason. Since the PA Turnpike opened to traffic in 1940, more than 30 Pennsylvania Turnpike employees have lost their lives while performing their duties; many of these tragedies happened in work zones.

The danger that highway workers face every day on the road is significant. We average more than 60 active Turnpike construction projects each year. There are thousands of workers on the road — especially in the spring and summer.

Work-zone crashes tend to result in a higher rate of injuries and fatalities compared to crashes that occur outside work areas. It is important to note that, on the Turnpike system, 30 percent of all crashes result in an injury or fatality; in a work zone, that jumps to 40 percent.

In the last few years, work-zone tragedies have increased across our toll-road system.

In fact, there have been two fatal crashes in Turnpike work zones just in the past two months; both involved the death of motorists travelling in different work areas on the Northeastern Extension. On May 4, a box truck crashed into the back of a tractor trailer in a maintenance pattern in Lehigh County, killing the driver of the box truck. On July 8, a passenger vehicle swerved to avoid crashing into an attenuator truck in the closed left lane of a Carbon County construction zone. The vehicle rolled, partially ejecting and killing the driver. Fortunately, no workers were injured in either incident.

Last year alone, there were 150 crashes in PA Turnpike work zones. That includes more than 30 incidents involving cars or tractor-trailers crashing into Truck Mounted Attenuators — brightly lit and striped trailers designed to absorb impacts and protect construction workers and motorists.

Nearly all of these led to customer and worker injuries. Again, a few resulted in fatalities.

This unfortunate increase in incidents is a result of three factors: first, we're seeing an upsurge of traffic on our system. Second, we have boosted our highway capital plan and now have more work zones than ever across our 550-plus mile system — parts of which will turn 75 years old on Oct. 1, 2015.

Finally, the increase is also due to motorists who today are confronted with more distractions than ever. Drivers who should be focused on driving and what's happening outside that windshield are more and more sidetracked by distractions like GPS devices, satellite radios, onboard movies and of course smartphones, to name a few.

But the biggest factor in all crashes — both inside and outside work areas — has to be speed. Excessive speed is cited as the number-one cause of crashes statewide; similarly, speed is the top cause of crashes within a work zone. Speed also effects crash severity. On average, there were 20 fatalities per year over the last five years in Pennsylvania work zones; excessive speed was listed as the primary factor in more than half.

One factor that seems to be contributing to speeding today is the cocoon-like feeling of security provided by our ultra-modern automobiles. Advancements in vehicle design now isolate drivers from once-common side effects of speed like noise and vibration. The result: Travelling at 80 miles per hour in a 2015 Toyota Corolla today is a much different experience than driving 80 mph in a Plymouth Reliant K 30 years ago. Technology has, in a sense, insulated us from the consequences of speeding.

Traffic increases have been a fact of life on the PA Turnpike and other interstates just about each year of our operation; and the proliferation of work-zones will continue as our highways age well beyond their expected design lives and as additional resources are

designated for their repair. This means the trend of work-zone crashes and the resulting deaths and injuries is here to stay.

Our highway maintenance and construction workers and their families are counting on us to help protect them; their safety is — and must continue to be — our main concern. In just the past three years, two of our colleagues have been killed in work zones. In both cases, speed and distraction were factors.

We are doing all we can to stem the rising tide of injuries and fatalities on our system. The Turnpike has been aggressive on all fronts to improve work-zone safety.

- The Commission recently ramped up our Orange Squeeze initiative. Orange Squeeze was created in 2012 as a joint operation with the Pennsylvania State Police. Troopers set up work-zone speed enforcement details, running radar from inside orange Turnpike maintenance trucks to flag speeding motorists.
- In May, we launched an aggressive education and advertising campaign so that motorists understand the consequence of speeding and unsafe driving: People get killed. This campaign includes TV and radio commercials, billboards and a strong online push to drive focus on safety. One television ad features actual Turnpike employees who tell drivers that they are a mom, a dad, a coach — that if they are hit by a car, they will die. Our colleagues implore viewers to slow down: a very simple, direct and compelling message.
- We formed a Work Zone Safety Subcommittee made up of five departments within the Turnpike, including our partners at the Pennsylvania State Police, to discuss and implement strategies in four main areas: Programmatic, Engineering, Enforcement and Education. Initiatives such as completing the FHWA work-zone safety assessment, coordinated contractor safety outreach, enhanced traffic-control products, connected vehicles and regional conferences are all actions we are spearheading to make our work zones safer.

Clearly, the PTC and our safety stakeholders have and will continue to exploit all of the traditional tools to address this issue.

However, agencies like the PTC, PennDOT and PSP have limited tools at our disposal to address work-zone safety; it therefore becomes more challenging to address this escalating concern. For instance, while we are thankful to have a dedicated State Police unit, Troop T is hovering around 80 percent in complement — essentially spreading troopers too thin. That's where the members of the Pennsylvania General Assembly come in: You can provide new, improved tools like speed cameras that we can add to our enforcement toolboxes.

As noted in the 2012 TAC report on Cameras in Work Zones, Maryland, Illinois, Oregon and Washington have all seen reductions in speed and improvements in work-zone safety after the implementation of automated-speed enforcement. In fact, Maryland's Safe Zones have shown a 35 percent reduction in overall work-zone crashes and a 70 percent reduction in work-zone crashes that resulted in injury or death. If Pennsylvania would realize similar reductions, it could mean saving 70 lives over five years.

As I have visited job sites and maintenance sheds across the Turnpike, people regularly approach me to share their stories of close calls and injuries — often with prolonged recovery times and sometimes with scars that will serve as lifetime reminders of their experiences.

It's not uncommon to meet someone like Greg from New Cumberland who was injured in four separate work-zone crashes during a 20-year career — the most recent of which led to concussion and temporary vision loss. Or Steve, from Devault who was working on the shoulder when a truck entered the work zone and killed a colleague and friend who was working right next to him.

When an employee tells me his spouse worries that he might not come home at the end of the day, I know it's time to take action. When a parent stresses that she may be taken away from her child, I feel something must be done. It's time to change motorist behavior in work

zones — not only for our highway workers and their loved ones, but also for our customers, passengers and their loved ones.

As you know, the highway owners — PTC and PennDOT — worked closely with the private sector — engineers and contractors — on the funding debate leading up to the 2013 passage of Act 89; today, we are similarly aligned on the issue of work-zone safety. People from all sectors within the ground-transportation industry agree it is our most critical challenge.

I strongly believe having new tools will change behavior by deterring speeding; our commissioners and I are anxious to work with lawmakers to launch a work-zone camera pilot project on our system when a bill is signed.

There is no greater priority for this commission than the safety of our workers. We are committed to doing whatever it takes to tackle this issue and save lives. We know that sense of commitment is shared by state legislators as well. Thank you.

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