



Trails - Not Just Recreational Facilities Anymore

When one thinks about the trails in the area, they are usually seen as recreational facilities. However, there are people who are using some of the trails for commuting purposes.

Paul Callahan, owner and operator of Cal-Mar Specialties located on Main St. in Luzerne, travels to work by bicycle 2-3 days a week from his home in Dallas. He picks up the Back Mountain Trail (BMT) at Carverton Road, and rides the length of the trail to the entrance at Parry St. in Luzerne Borough. Although Callahan bikes for the exercise, he also enjoys avoiding the hassles of driving on PA Route 309, the main artery leading into and out of the Back Mountain area of the county. Callahan has been a recreational bike-rider for about 10 years, but started using his bike as an alternate means of transportation to work about three years ago.

Two professors from Wilkes University are also commuting to work via bicycle. Professors John Koch and Greg Peters commute from Shavertown, Kingston Township, to the downtown Wilkes-Barre campus using the BMT and the Levee Trail.

Peters commutes by bike 1-2 times per week while Professor Koch commutes 5 days/week.

Peters, a professor in the Chemistry Department, was spurred toward commuting by bike by high gas prices, convenience, and an opportunity for practical exercise. Instead of going to the YMCA to exercise on the treadmill, Peters gets his

exercise while commuting, and commuting by bike instead of a car makes it more convenient since he can literally go from the door of his home to the door of his office on his bike.

Koch, a professor in the Computer Science Department, was motivated to start commuting by bike by the loss of free, convenient parking at the university. For the past three years, he has commuted by bike all year long in rain or snow. Using a shaft bicycle, which is heavier than a regular bike and has an enclosed chain, Koch can more easily navigate in winter. Having been a runner, Koch has all the necessary rain gear he needs for riding in inclement weather, and with two bags on the back of his bike, he's able to carry

whatever paperwork he needs for class.

Peters and Koch live very close to each other, and so take the same route into work. The trip downtown takes about 40 minutes, and the trip home, being uphill, takes about an hour. The time is almost comparable to commuting by car, at least for the morning trip. It takes about 20-30 minutes to drive from Shavertown to Wilkes-Barre, depending on traffic, and then takes 5-10 minutes to walk from one of the parking facilities to their offices.

Both Koch and Peters said that they probably would not be able to commute by bike to work if it weren't for the existence of the trails, in their case, the BMT and the Levee Trails.



Paul Callahan, at the Luzerne Borough entrance to the BMT.



Bottom Photo: John Koch, with his bike parked in his office.

I-80 Tolling Project Application Rejected

I had originally written an article on the I-80 Tolling Project for this issue of the newsletter, but because of the rejection of the application by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), that article has gone by the wayside - as will many transportation projects for lack of funding.

Although many citizens and politicians are applauding the decision by FHWA, the fact still remains that there is not enough funding to address all the repair and/or maintenance work that needs to be done on I-80, and all other interstates and other state roads throughout the state.

Granted, no one likes to pay more for anything, let alone a highway on which we are accustomed to riding for free, (unlike our neighbors to the west in Ohio where I-80 is tolled), but the question remains - how will we as a state raise the needed funding to keep our highways and bridges in working order?

The other option on the table is leasing the Turnpike to a private firm, but many legislators seem to be against that as well, and what legislator wants to take the unpopular stand of raising the gas tax? The current gas tax is 18.4 cents/mile. In order to meet the \$450 million shortfall in funds needed to maintain our highway/bridge system, the gas tax would need to be raised by 8 cents/gallon. Even if the legislature raised the gas tax, it is becoming less reliable as a funding source because of more fuel-efficient vehicles and a reduction of driving due to high gas prices.



Heavy truck traffic, as shown here, accounts for much of the deterioration of roadways in the MPO region.

The opponents of the I-80 tolling proposal said that economic development projects would be lost due to tolling, but what about the economic development projects across the state that will be lost because there are not enough funds to put new projects on the Transportation Improvement Programs (TIPS)?

The TIP for the Lackawanna/Luzerne MPO has little room for inclusion of new construction of roadways, many of which are designed to promote economic development, or at least to make access to existing industrial parks safer. The newly-adopted 2009 TIP has less than ten capacity-adding projects listed. However, the Governor recently further reduced the amount of funding that can be used for capacity-adding projects so that most of the TIP funding would be used to fix bridges. So, the lack of adequate transportation funding is definitely affecting economic development in Luzerne and Lackawanna Counties.

When asked about the current funding situation, Adrian Merolli, Executive Director of the Luzerne County Planning Com-

mission, and long-time member of the MPO Coordinating Committee said, "In the end, we, the driving public, will end up paying for our roads and bridges, whether that will be in the form of an increase in the gas tax, higher tolls or some other means. If we do not find ways to increase TIP funds, we will be left with dangerous roads, unsafe bridges, and few opportunities to expand our economic base."

All transportation funds come from the Highway Trust Fund (HTF). If Congress did not approve legislation last week to transfer \$8 billion into the HTF, there would have been nothing left as of October 1.

Pete Kahn, President of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, explained, "Restoring the Highway Trust Fund is a short-term solution. It is time to face up to the reality that America must rebuild and renew our aging system if we hope to give our children the same chance at prosperity that we inherited. We should use this breathing room to focus on how we will meet our future transportation needs. We hope the bipartisan cooperation that brought all parties together in this crisis will prevail as we address the challenge just around the corner".

Everyone seems to agree that the transportation funding situation is in dire need of help. The real challenge lies in finding a way to make sure there is a reliable source of funding that will be sufficient to meet both maintenance and new construction needs. Any suggestions?

Public Meetings on Long Range Transportation Plan Scheduled

The Lackawanna/Luzerne MPO is in the process of updating the Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) in conjunction with the preparation of a bi-county comprehensive plan.

The LRTP assesses the transportation system as it exists currently, and using a variety of indicators including population growth and development trends, tries to predict the transportation needs for the next 25 years.

The MPO is working with McCormick

Taylor, Inc. to prepare the plan, and has sought input from the three MPO committees.

The consultant is now at a point where they are seeking input from the public. Three public meetings have been scheduled to present the data that has been gathered to date, and to hear the ideas and opinions of the people who use the transportation system every day.

The meetings will be held from 6:00 PM - 9:00 PM, with the first hour being an informal gathering where people can wander

around the room to view the maps and ask questions. The formal meeting will start at 7:00 PM at the following three locations:

Tuesday, October 14: Luzerne County Community College, Educational Conference Center, Room 132.

Wednesday, October 15: Hazleton Area High School Auditorium, 1601 W. 23rd St., Hazleton.

Thursday, October 16: Lackawanna County EMA Building, 30 Valley View Business Park, Jessup.

COLTS Awarded Grant for Welfare To Work Program

For the ninth year in a row, COLTS has been successful in obtaining a state grant for the Welfare To Work (w2w) program.

The amount awarded for Fiscal Year 2008-2009 is \$65,183. Since its inception in 1999, the w2w clientele has expanded from 35 clients to 130. The purpose of the program is to provide discounted transportation for low-to-moderate-income individuals to and from work, until they can earn enough to leave the program and pay the full fare.

The service is an "open door" service in that it not only picks up w2w clients, but also picks up regular fare-paying passengers, handicapped riders, and senior citizens. COLTS does not operate the service directly, but contracts it out to Northeastern Transit.

The transportation route lies in the city of Scranton and Dunmore Borough, and oper-

ates between the hours of 8 PM and 12 AM, Monday through Friday.

To help ensure the success of the program, COLTS has established formal partnership agreements with the following agencies:

- Lackawanna County Assistance Office
- Workforce Investment Board
- Career Link of Lackawanna County
- Child Care Information Service
- United Neighborhood Centers of Scranton and Lackawanna County
- Scranton-Lackawanna Human Development Agency and
- Scranton & Lackawanna County

Housing Authorities

COLTS has also applied for Job Access Reverse Commute (JARC) funds to expand the current w2w program. Employers have increasingly relocated from city centers to the suburbs, thus altering the typical commute of many individuals. These shifts in employment and population have resulted in a complex mix of reverse commuting and inter-suburban travel for low-income persons to get to work. The expansion would cover the entire city of Scranton, Dunmore, Dickson City, Throop, and Olyphant, including many newly-developed industrial parks. The second phase of this project will include service to industrial parks located to the south of Scranton.

Submitted by Debbie Schrader, Deputy Director of Development, COLTS

COLTS Welcomes New Executive Director

Bob Fiume was recently appointed as Executive Director of COLTS, after having served as Director of Hazleton Public Transit for eight years.

In a recent conversation, he shared some of the goals and challenges he sees for the transit system, "There are several areas we need to work on. We're going to do a route analysis next year to determine if there are areas we're not serving, and how the route system can be improved, with our ultimate goal being to increase

ridership. We're also going to do a marketing plan to promote our services, and engage in outreach, especially to senior citizens, as we did in Hazleton. We've scheduled training sessions for seniors on both the free ridership program and on how to ride the bus. The training will take place at senior centers where they will learn how to read a schedule, and how to recognize their stops, since some seniors are afraid of getting off at the wrong place. Following the training session, the

seniors will actually go for a bus ride to the Viewmont Mall. This will give them the opportunity to put into practice what they learned in the training session, and allow them to do some shopping as well.

We are also hoping to break ground on the Intermodal Center before the end of the year. Once completed, it will be a great place for our riders. Our ultimate goal is to provide the best service we can, and thereby increase our ridership."

Smart Transportation Guidebook Developed

PennDOT and New Jersey DOT (NJDOT) have collaborated on a project to develop a guidebook on Smart Transportation techniques.

Smart Transportation is a new approach to roadway planning in which transportation projects are built according to the specific needs of each project. Use of the guidebook is not meant to produce a cookie-cutter model for roadway design; rather, the de-

sign of every roadway must be done in consideration of the context and location of the project.

The following are 10 general themes suggested to be considered during the early development phases of a project:

Money counts; Understand the context - plan and design within the context; Choose projects with high value/price ratios; Enhance the local network; Look beyond

level-of-service measures; Safety first and maybe safety only; Accommodate all modes; Leverage and preserve existing investments; Build towns, not sprawl; and Develop relationships with local governments as strong land-use partners.

The entire guidebook can be accessed at the following web site: ftp://ftp.dot.state.pa.us/public/Bureaus/design/SMART_TRANSPORTATION.pdf.

**LACKAWANNA/LUZERNE METROPOLITAN
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**PennDOT District 4-0 web
site:
www.neparoads.com**

Federal Safe Routes To School Applications Received

The Federal Safe Routes To School (SRTS) Program is a Federal-Aid program of the United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration. The program was created by Section 1404 of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act -Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU).

The program provides funds to states to improve the ability of primary and middle school children to walk or bicycle to school safely. Nationwide, the program is funded at \$612 million over five Federal Fiscal Years (FY 2005-2009), and is administered by State Departments of Transportation.

Pennsylvania received \$12.6 million to distribute to applicants who receive the highest scores. The Department received 95 applications from across the state requesting projects that total \$56 million.

PennDOT received the following four applications from the Lackawanna/Luzerne MPO area:

West Side Trail Phase 1B: The proposed infrastructure of this project will replace 1.42 miles of sidewalks, aprons and curbs, accessible ramps and crosswalks, safety signage, utility pole, and tree lawn along Eighth Street, Shoemaker Avenue, Tenth Street, Erie Street, and Memorial Street. The project runs through four municipalities and will affect students who attend Wyoming Area Secondary Center and JFK Elementary School.

Butler Township Bike/Walking Lanes: The purpose of this project is to create safe biking/walking lanes to the Drums Elementary and Middle School along various streets in Butler Township. As an added benefit, the lanes will provide access to the municipal Recreation Complex located on Butler Drive.

Heights Terrace Safe Route To School: The Hazleton School District and the City of Hazleton have come together to find ways to encourage children to walk to school, starting with Heights Terrace Ele-

mentary School. 895 of the 1010 students live within a mile of the school, and thus, have the potential to walk or ride their bikes to school. Infrastructure improvements and safety measures are being sought in this application.

Archbald/Valley View: Archbald Borough and Valley View School District are working to provide a safe route to school for students who live, or will live in the future, in 2 new subdivisions which are adjacent to the Valley View Campus along Columbus Drive. Construction of a new curb and sidewalks will provide the basis for implementing an educational program that will encourage the students to walk or bike to school.

The MPO Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) will review and evaluate the applications with the end result being a numerical score. The applications will then be sent to PennDOT Central Office and evaluated with the applications received from other parts of the state.