

Fall
2013



LACKAWANNA/LUZERNE METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION

CONNECTIONS

Focus 81 Committee Celebrates 10th Anniversary

The Focus 81 Committee celebrated its tenth anniversary at an event on October 18th at the Junior Achievement Building on Oak Street in Pittston. The Northeastern Pennsylvania Alliance (NEPA) formed the committee in 2003 to address safety and congestion issues on the approximately 30-mile I-81 corridor from Nanticoke in Luzerne County to Waverly in Lackawanna County.

At the celebration event, the Focus 81 Committee displayed the new website, www.focus81.com, and unveiled television and radio commercials that will promote the re-designed website, and remind drivers of this valuable web resource.

The website provides quick

links to traffic and road conditions as well as Twitter alerts regarding updated traffic problems.

Current and planned construction projects are listed

and the road conditions link enables users to personalize their map and zoom in on the area of their commute.

(continued on page 2)



From l to r: Jeffrey Box, NEPA; George Kelly, Lackawanna County; Larry Shifflet, PennDOT Central Office; Debbie Noone, PennDOT District 4-0; State Rep. Marty Flynn; State Rep Mike Carroll; Tom Lawson, Borton-Lawson Engineering; and Rick Williams, Luzerne County Council.

Phase v of Wilkes-Barre Streetscape Project in Progress

Phase V of the Streetscape Enhancement Project for the City of Wilkes-Barre represents the next evolution of the revitalization of the Central Business District that began several years ago. The City has systematically improved lighting and curbing throughout Public Square to improve pedestrian safety and access in this crucial corridor of the City.

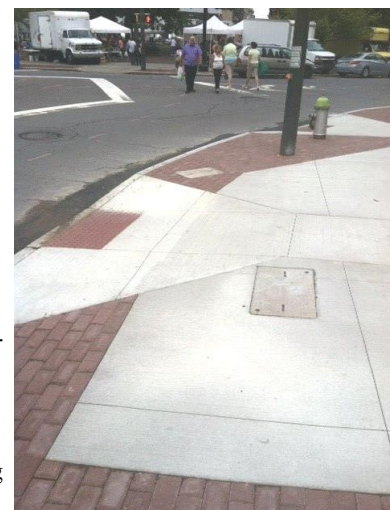
Benches and bike racks were installed as well as new trees planted to create a modern public space that is inviting to businesses, residents, and visitors. Phase V is a \$1.2 million

project funded by the Federal Highway Administration and the Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program funds.

The City was also able to add parking spaces in this phase of the project to make it easy and convenient for patrons of downtown businesses and restaurants.

The successful streetscape project is creating business opportunities and recruiting people to live in the City like never before.

Submitted by Butch Frati, Director of Operations, Wilkes-Barre City



New sidewalks and curbs on Public Square in Wilkes-Barre

Focus 81 Committee Celebrates 10th Anniversary (continued from page 1)

During the past ten years, Focus 81 has accomplished the following:

Secured nearly \$10 million for engineering work to expand I-81 through the Davis Street/Central Scranton Expressway segment;

Assisted in securing \$1 million to complete an expanded study of the corridor to identify ways to improve safety, reduce congestion, and address long-term alternatives;

Launched the original Focus 81 website in 2004;

Worked to designate two segments as "Highway Safety Corridors" where high speeds and high crash rates occur. Fines are doubled in these areas;



One of the safety signs located along the I-81 corridor.

Urged PennDOT, in coordination with the state police, to create eleven new sites to be used as traffic enforcement pull-over areas, inspection sites, or radar ob-

servation posts throughout the corridor;

Worked with PennDOT to revise plans for replacing the St. Mary's Cemetery Bridge to include 3 lanes to accommodate potential future expansion efforts; and

Conducted a number of public educational events addressing tire safety, incident management and truck safety.

For more information on Focus 81, go to www.focus81.com.

Submitted by Kate McMahon, NEPA

State Transportation Commission To Use Public Meetings For 2015 Twelve Year Program Input

The State Transportation Commission (STC), in its effort to update its approach to interacting with and gathering information from the public, announced that it will use public meetings held within their assigned MPO/RPO regions as a way to solicit public input on the 2015 Twelve Year Program which will be adopted in 2014.

PennDOT Central Office will inform STC members of the dates of public meetings

within their regions, STC members will select which one they can attend, and the PennDOT liaisons will inform the planning partners about the attendance of their STC representative at a scheduled MPO or other type of meeting.

Frank Paczewski, the STC member assigned to the Lackawanna/Luzerne MPO region, will be invited to attend the combined Transportation Advisory, Technical

and Coordinating Committees meeting on December 4 at 10:00 AM at the District 4-0 headquarters. If he can attend, input can be given to him directly. If he cannot attend, PennDOT Central Office personnel will relay the public input to the STC.

All collected input will be presented to the STC at their December 12, 2013 meeting for review.

National Public Lands Day Observed

On September 28th, 70 people volunteered their time to observe National Public Lands Day on the Lackawanna River Heritage Trail in Scranton.

A new fence that was installed in July needed to be water-sealed to prevent premature weathering and/or rotting of the wood. The volunteers were able to water-seal a half mile of fence in under two hours. Some volunteers got down and dirty by cleaning debris out of the Lackawanna River. Twelve tires and four shopping carts were removed along with several bags of trash.

The new fence is located in a 2-mile section of the trail between South Scranton and Keyser Creek in Taylor Borough.

The volunteers included University of Scranton Seniors for Smiles group, Scranton High School Pennserve group, and eighth-graders from Riverside Elementary West School.

The eighth-graders had painted signs for the trail when they were in fourth grade, and their teacher, Shawn Murphy, promised that he would bring them back to the trail to see the signs installed.

Riverside Students & Teacher



Ashmore Pedestrian Bridge Construction Near Completion

The Ashmore Pedestrian Bridge, a key link on the Greater Hazleton Rails To Trails (GHRT) trail, is in the process of being put in place over the active Norfolk Southern rail line. The bridge is an all-steel structure that measures 117 feet.

The GHRT trail will eventually connect lower Luzerne County, Eckley Miners Village and the Greater Hazleton Area to the Delaware & Lehigh National Historic Heritage Area at Lehigh Gorge Park. Over 35,000 visitors use the 4-mile section of trail every year. When completed, the trail will be 16 miles long.

When an at-grade crossing at the site was deemed unfeasible, the GHRT volunteers began a six-year fund-raising effort to purchase a bridge. The group received PennDOT Trans-

portation Enhancement funds in the amount of \$210,400, along with two Department of Conservation of Natural Resource grants in the amounts of \$35,200 and \$295,000. Part of the local match

funding came from the Lackawanna/Luzerne MPO.

The bridge placement is unique in that it is being placed on abutments that were constructed in 1892 to allow a double train

track crossing over the Norfolk Southern line. Alfred Benesch & Company, who inspected the site, said that some pointing work and an increase in the height of the abutments to allow clearance for taller trains will be necessary.

The bridge has been designed to enable light trucks and small emergency vehicles to use it to gain access to Hazle Brook in case the existing sole paved road is blocked.

For more information on the GHRT, contact Bob Skulsky at 455-1509.



Ashmore Pedestrian Bridge being placed on the GHRT trail.

MPO Loses Two Long-Time Members

By the end of the year, the Lackawanna/Luzerne MPO will have lost two committee members to retirement.

Kurt Kempter started out his career with the Lackawanna County Regional Planning Commission, but after a few years took a job with COLTS where he spent 28 years as Director of Development. Kurt was an active member of the Technical Committee since he started working with COLTS. According to Bob Fiume, Executive Director of COLTS, "Kurt's expertise on transit

issues was an invaluable asset to COLTS, the MPO and his fellow transit operators. His institutional knowledge is sorely missed."

Adrian Merolli, Executive Director of the Luzerne County Planning Commission, will retire at the end of 2013. He has worked for the planning commission for over 40 years and has been involved with transportation planning for most of that time as a member of the Coordinating Committee and MPO staff member.

According to long-time colleague, Nancy

Snee, "The knowledge and experience acquired over a 40-year period cannot be replaced. The relationships he has forged over his career, coupled with his ability to navigate the ever-evolving transportation planning process, made him one of the best. He will be missed very much."

The MPO wants to take this opportunity to thank Kurt and Adrian for their many years of service, and wish them a long and healthy retirement.

Forced Bridge Postings Should Be the Last Straw *In My Opinion by Nancy Snee*

The lack of adequate funding for transportation facilities, in particular, roads and bridges, is not a new thing. It has been fairly constant for several years. It has forced the Department of Transportation and its planning partners to come up with varied and sundry processes to determine how the limited funding should be spent. Right-sizing projects - stripping a project down to its bare necessities - has been the mantra for a decade or more. Spending 80-90% of a region's transportation funds on existing roads and bridges,

also known as asset management, is PennDOT's attempt to make the most of the limited funding by concentrating on taking care of existing assets instead of investing money in building new projects, or expanding existing ones. Why create more need for funding when you don't have enough to fix what you have? Makes sense.

Then there was the development of the Linking Planning and NEPA (NEPA referring to the National Environmental Protection Act) process to identify the best cost estimate of a

project up front so that contractors would not be surprised by additional funding needed for elements discovered during the environmental review.

The most recent step PennDOT has taken to spread the scarce funding around is to post bridges, limiting the weight to be carried on them to slow down their rate of deterioration. This step really got my attention. How bad does it have to be when you start downgrading facilities? Pretty bad, I'd say. (Continued on page 4).

**LACKAWANNA/LUZERNE METROPOLITAN
PLANNING ORGANIZATION**

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MPO Web Page Link:

[http://www.luzernecounty.org/county/
departments_agencies/
planning_commission/lackawannaluzerne-
metropolitan-planning-organization](http://www.luzernecounty.org/county/departments_agencies/planning_commission/lackawannaluzerne-metropolitan-planning-organization)

**PennDOT District 4-0 web site:
neparoads.com**

Forced Bridge Postings Should Be the Last Straw *In My Opinion by Nancy Snee*

PennDOT is in the process of adding weight restrictions, or lowering existing weight restrictions, on approximately 1,000 bridges statewide.

Bridges are designed to carry loads above the weight of a fully-loaded tractor trailer which is 80,000 pounds. Bridge engineers call this ability to carry weights in excess of 80,000 pounds a "factor of safety". Bridges that have lost this factor of safety deteriorate at an accelerated rate.

Locally, there are five state bridges and nine locally-owned bridges in Luzerne County that will have weight restrictions to help preserve safety, slow deterioration, and extend their time of useful service.

In Lackawanna County, PennDOT will place weight restrictions on three state-owned and thirteen locally-owned bridges.

Since Barry Schoch became Secretary of Transportation, one of his main goals has been to develop ways to increase transportation funding through streamlining internal processes and finding ways to increase the funding pot based on the measures listed in the Governor's Transportation Reform Commission's

Report.

The Department has made great strides in making internal changes that have saved money and made operations run more smoothly, but the Secretary has had little or no cooperation from state lawmakers in all of his attempts to raise the level of transportation funding in any meaningful way.

The majority of state lawmakers do not want to raise fees or taxes to provide more transportation funds based, seemingly, on a political philosophy of no new taxes. "No new taxes" makes for a great platform to run on - after all, who wants to pay more fees and taxes - but is it realistic? Inflation exists - that's reality. The prices of materials, labor and overhead costs rise every year making every type of project more expensive. Consequently, taxes and fees need to rise incrementally every year to keep pace with these increases.

There are between 9 and 10 million registered vehicles in the state. Raising the registration fee by \$5 would produce nearly \$50 million in revenue. What indi-

vidual car owner cannot afford a \$5 increase? I spend that much on lunch every day. Some people spend close to that on a cup of coffee.

I realize that for businesses that own a fleet of vehicles, the extra costs add up, but the time consumed using detours, and vehicle repairs caused by rough roads and bridges also costs businesses money.

Safe, well taken care of roads and bridges are necessities for a society to function as it should. They are the utilities we all rely on to get where we need to go. Prices for natural gas, electricity and water go up fairly regularly and we have no choice but to pay the increased rate based on the amount we use. Perhaps it's time to view transportation-related costs the same way - assume costs will rise periodically and pay according to the amount we use.



Weight restricted bridge on E. Division St., Hanover Township, Luzerne County