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Pa. lawmakers begin state tour on transportation issues as bridges, public transit get attention



Ford Turner
Post-Gazette Harrisburg Bureau
fturner@post-gazette.com
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HARRISBURG — The fact that 12% of local-

and state-owned bridges in greater Pittsburgh are in poor shape was one of the concerning facts laid out for state lawmakers Wednesday as a group of them kicked off a series of eight meetings around Pennsylvania focused on transportation.

The 2024-25 budget agreement of [\\$47.6 billion finalized in early July](#) included investments of an additional \$80 million in public transit and \$80 million for roads and bridges. The former figure was about \$200 million less than what Gov. Josh Shapiro wanted, and the latter was relatively tiny compared to billions of dollars in possible projects.

House Transportation Committee Chairman Ed Neilson, D-Philadelphia, said the panel would go around the state in the weeks ahead to hear presentations on “all aspects of transportation.” Those will include airports, work force, and ports on bodies of water. The hope is to create a new plan for more funding when lawmakers return to Harrisburg next month. An aide to Mr. Neilson said one of the meetings would take place Sept. 11 in Pittsburgh.

On Wednesday, during a session held in an Indiana County office, Westmoreland County Chamber of Commerce President Dan DeBone cited the 12% figure concerning Pittsburgh-area bridges from a [recent study from the national transportation research group TRIP](#). Mr. DeBone noted the 510 bridges involved carry 1.2 million vehicles a day.

Mr. DeBone said state lawmakers need to come up with a predictable, reliable, and larger stream of revenue. He gave a kudo to Mr. Shapiro for his unsuccessful budget proposal to steer an additional 1.75% of the state’s sales tax revenue toward public transit.

“The time for action is now,” Mr. DeBone said.

Transportation Secretary Mike Carroll said he has visited rural areas where public shared-ride van service is the only way for some people to reach medical appointments. Nonetheless, he acknowledged Philadelphia’s SEPTA transit system gets the most attention.

Mr. Carroll said it was justified to the extent that Pennsylvania’s economy is “driven in very significant ways by the success” of Philadelphia, Delaware, Chester, Montgomery, and Bucks counties.

[Pittsburgh Regional Transit was in line to get a \\$39 million funding boost](#) in Mr. Shapiro’s budget proposal, but the final agreement included only \$12 million. Asked on Wednesday how transit agencies spend funding increases from the state, Mr. Carroll noted two big items: avoiding route eliminations and staving off fare increases.

Both Mr. Neilson and Rep. Kerry Benninghoff of Centre County, the top Republican on the committee, on Wednesday described the chronic needs of transportation.

Mr. Benninghoff said big “packages” of spending on a single theme often are not popular in Harrisburg. At the same time, he said, “Time is of the essence. When you have people who have a bridge out and all of a sudden it is going to take the ambulance another seven minutes to get there, there are certain instances where that is just not acceptable.”

Mr. Shapiro recently spoke of top lawmakers interest in a concept where [public transit and infrastructure funding would be increased by creating formal regulations](#) for the so-called “skill games” seen in bars, clubs and convenience stores, and putting a tax on them. Any action on that cannot take place until lawmakers return to Harrisburg.

In an interview, Mr. Benninghoff said the concept was worth a look.

Pennsylvania’s beautiful geography, with plentiful streams, hills, valleys, and rivers, creates a perpetual nightmare for road and bridge construction and maintenance, he said. To fund it, he said, “A new gaming resource is attractive.”

Mr. Carroll said the state is responsible for about 25,000 bridges. Another 7,000 are locally owned, he said, and any additional money designated by lawmakers for work on them would be “unbelievably helpful.”

Asked how much money would be required to bring all bridges up to an acceptable standard, Mr. Carroll said it was too “hypothetical” to answer specifically.

But he added, “The number that you are describing is probably measured in the billions.”

Ford Turner: fturner@post-gazette.com