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Dan DeBone: Time for legislative action on Pa.'s transportation and infrastructure crisis

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[Dan DeBone](#) | Monday, September 30, 2024



As the State House and Senate return for their remaining voting days this year, one major piece of overdue legislation demands immediate attention — [Act 89](#). Passed a decade ago, Act 89 was one of the most comprehensive transportation packages in Pennsylvania's history. It provided funding for public transportation, highways, bridges, aviation, pedestrian improvements, and more. While it delivered significant improvements across the commonwealth, the act failed to keep up with inflation, leaving our infrastructure predictable but stagnant.

As president and CEO of the Westmoreland County Chamber of Commerce, which represents small businesses, nonprofits and large corporations, I understand how crucial public transportation and safe, reliable roads are to the vitality of our economy. These infrastructures serve as the lifeblood of our communities, linking residents to jobs, schools, health care and opportunities for economic growth.

Before leading the chamber, I spent over two decades advocating for transportation funding. I witnessed firsthand how crucial investments in roads, bridges and transit systems are to the economic success of our state. Today, however, we face a daunting challenge: despite the progress made, our infrastructure funding is in jeopardy.

Consider this: public transportation alone generates \$5.4 billion in economic activity annually and supports 39,000 jobs across Pennsylvania. Yet, with Act 89 expired and covid relief funds drying up, our transit systems — especially in smaller urban and rural areas — are facing severe cuts. In Westmoreland County, for example, a population decline of over 10,000 residents in the last decade has been exacerbated by the lack of affordable and efficient mobility options. Without reliable public transit, young professionals and families may leave, taking economic growth with them.

This trend threatens to drive our county — and others across the state — into a “death spiral” where cuts in services lead to

further population decline, which in turn drives away employers.

One immediate step legislators can take is to pass [Senate Bill 597](#) and [House Bill 1914](#), which would provide predictability in capital funding and give local authorities more control over transit decisions. These bills would also prioritize rural transit systems, ensuring they receive the federal dollars needed to continue serving the communities that depend on them.

In Westmoreland County, 172,000 employees <https://triblive.com/opinion/dan-debone-time-for-legislative-action-on-pa-s-transportation-and-infrastructure-crisis/> individuals rely on a wide range of industries to sustain our economy. Manufacturing is the second-largest employment sector here, supporting 26,000 jobs that produce and ship goods across the globe. But these industries depend on reliable roads and bridges. With Pennsylvania's infrastructure receiving a “C” grade in 2022, it's clear that our current funding levels are not keeping pace with inflation, which poses a significant threat to our state's economy.

A [report from the National Transportation Research Group](#) (TRIP) found that 13% of Pennsylvania's locally and state-maintained bridges are rated in poor condition, including 12% of bridges in the Pittsburgh area. These 510 bridges carry nearly 1.2 million vehicles each day, presenting serious safety and economic risks if left unaddressed. Infrastructure investments are more than maintenance projects — they are long-term economic strategies. Failure to adequately fund and maintain our infrastructure will lead to higher costs for state and local governments, decreased safety, stalled economic growth, and increased burdens on taxpayers. The consequences will ripple across industries and communities.

I applaud Gov. Josh Shapiro's recent [efforts to increase the allocation of sales tax to the Public Transportation Trust Fund](#) (PTTF) by 1.75%, along with the \$51 million investment from the multimodal transportation fund, which supports 66 projects across 32 counties. These are important steps, but they are only part of the solution.

The question that continues to loom is: How do we pay for the long-term needs of Pennsylvania's infrastructure? The answer is not simple. Shuffling funds within the general budget, increasing sales tax allocations or raising the already high gas tax may seem like options, but they each come with significant trade-offs. Given the current volatility in fuel prices, increasing the gas tax further is not a viable solution.

I don't envy the difficult choices facing our state legislators, but I urge them to act quickly and boldly. Time is running out to address Pennsylvania's critical infrastructure needs. The state's future prosperity hinges on securing predictable, reliable, and growing funding streams for our roads, bridges, and public transit systems.

Dan DeBone is president and CEO of the Westmoreland County Chamber of Commerce.