I-80 Expansion : Adding Analysis & Insight to the Facts

By Stroudsburg's I-80 Project Impact AAA Task Force = Awareness, Answers, Action

We all agree that designing solutions to the issues with Interstate-80 is definitely not an easy task to tackle. Whereas several points made by Senator Scavello, in his Aug 29 editorial "Interstate 80 Expansion: Separating Fact From Fiction" are valid, facts alone, *without knowledgeable analysis*, will not yield superior results.

The Borough of Stroudsburg's I-80 Project Impact Task Force has been diligently working for the past two years to bring additional insights to the proposed safety reconstruction of Interstate 80 through our town. We've examined the original studies and the proposed plans, helped the public become aware of what is happening, provided to PennDOT important local knowledge of our our roads, helped establish a broad-based Project Advisory Group, and have worked with PennDOT to identify changes and improvements to their proposals so the Route 80 project will provide the most possible benefits with the least possible negative impacts.

Most importantly, the task force is completely in favor of safety improvements to lengthen entrance & exit ramps, improve visibility, increase bridge heights & capacities, and include full-width shoulders BUT, several of the changes to "bring the roadway up to today's standards" are not necessary, not worth the short and long term disruption, not worth the expense, and will create more problems than they solve. Despite claims that the highway must meet *all* Federal Guidelines, it is just not true. The Federal HIghway Administration (FHWA) and PennDOT's own publications allow, and even encourage, flexibility in aspects of highway design to accommodate unique situations and local context.

The most egregious and contentious part of current plans = the addition of more travel lanes for just the 3-4 mile extent of the current project through Stroudsburg is a really, really bad idea. At each end of this project, the highway will still be two travel lanes in each direction. In such a situation, frustrated drivers who have endured slower westbound traffic through the Delaware Water Gap, or approaching eastbound from Bartonsville, will be delighted to speed up where there is an additional lane, attempting to pass all the cars they can, *as fast as they can*, until 3-4 miles later when they slam into the rear-end of the merely re-located traffic jam. This not only creates an extremely dangerous situation, but it encourages the highest speeds through exactly the stretch of roadway where we're trying to get people to slow down - through town !

PennDOT staff, and their models of traffic flow presented to the public, have shown that the expansion to six lanes just from Broad St Exit 307 through 9th street Exit 303 *will not work* until three lanes are in place westbound from Bartonsville to the split of Route 380 & Route 80 beyond Scotrun and eastbound from Route 380 until Route 33 peals off southbound. Proponents of lane expansion say that this is indeed going to be done …. someday - but our Task Force has not seen any serious discussion of this future-promised project; no planning; no studies; no preliminaries being initiated. How many years will we have to endure dangerous areas of higher speeds through town and lane-reduction accidents before that project is complete, if it ever is ? Already the current project has been in the works for more than 20 years since discussion of it began.

Less lanes through Stroudsburg means there will be slower traffic through town when volume is high; and that's a good thing ! So yes,of course, if lane expansion is necessary for the future, it absolutely must be started west of Bartonsville where traffic congestion is the worst and where there is land to take without as much negative impact. This may have a positive effect on the rest of the highway helping to minimize crash statistics and eliminate the need for 6 lanes through Stroudsburg. Just because we need a safety improvement project through Stroudsburg does not mean we now have to make the dumb move of expanding the highway through the wrong segment and reduce safety through town for years to come.

Already PennDOT has adopted Task Force recommendations related to the Park Ave Exit and they have (belatedly) initiated further study of the 611 corridor from Stroudsburg to Bartonsville, which could take significant pressure off

Route 80 congestion by providing a functioning alternate route for the 47% of I-80 traffic that is local ! With very minor widening, re-striping and defined median left-turns, Route 611 could safely and effectively accommodate 2 lanes of traffic in each direction. This would not only relieve pressure on Route 80, but when I-80 does get diverted, or jammed up due to an accident, the grid lock would not automatically extend to the entire Monroe County region.

PennDOT has not yet backed off of their intention to close the westbound Dreher Ave exit and the Eastbound Dreher Avenue entrance. These alternative access points already exist, would not be costly to improve in place and they provide essential alternative routes in the event of accidents on Route 80. Interstate 80 is not a highway in isolation, it is part of a *transportation network* ; Networks need relief valves and redundancy for maximum performance and efficiencies. Similarly, Shafers Schoolhouse Road intersection at Route 209, though not specifically a part of the Route 80 project, if closed, it will unnecessarily have a significant negative impact on our regional transportation network, concentrating traffic in too few places, and limiting alternatives for emergency access and convenient daily use. PennDOTs argument that the Dreher Ave access points are “too close” to other exits and entrances demonstrates a blind adherence to (not very explicit, nor publicized) numerical measures at the expense of knowledgeable solutions.

Another unnecessary and disruptive “improvement” that is part of the current plans for the project, is the relocation of the exits and entrances at West Main St. farther west to where 4-lane Route 209 corsses over West Main St.. Instead, changes to the interchange at its existing location can still improve safety with larger radii and separated merge points (such the good idea of a “flyover” entrance to Rte 209 South separate from entry to Route 80 West). Some less-disruptive solutions may not be “ideal” in the eyes of a transportation engineer sitting at a desk but they can meet minimum requirements and not wipe out half a dozen businesses and not facilitate interstate travelers never realizing there is a town nearby - *and* would go a lot easier on the half-billion dollar budget. Highway designers want all the on and off points of an interchange to be in the same location without having to find or traverse any distance in order to go in any direction on the interstate. Such a configuration has a degree of convenience for the long-distance traveller, but, in this case, it would separate access to Stroudsburg from access to the highway, would require properties be taken for construction along a portion of West Main St and increase traffic on a local road.

Back to the projected increase in traffic for the next 25 years on Route 80: The often cited prediction of a Level of service “F” on Route 80 by the year 2045 is not the failing grade that is implied. What the different “levels of service” actually mean in terms of traffic speeds and volumes, is buried in Technical Manuals (a.k.a “The Green Book”) and unfortunately those levels never seem to get explained in public - but we all know “F’ must be bad !

However, trend-setting concepts that are promoted in PennDOT’s own 2008 *Smart Transportation Guidebook* include :

a) *Right sizing of projects to achieve a high value to price ratio, instead of constructing projects to achieve optimum Levels of Service performance measures;*
b) *Defining wide ranging measures of project success; (i.e. not just Levels of Service)*
c) *The need to understand place in transportation planning, design and construction;*
d) *A roadway typology that is not based solely on functional classification, but also takes into account land use and place;*
e) *The idea that high design speed does not automatically equate to high design quality*

And, it is in a 2005 study by NEPA MPO for this very project, where under “Needs” page 4, these two points are made :

- *“Because this project focuses specifically on Friday evening conditions, significant consideration was given to whether or not a possible capacity-adding improvement would be worth the expense, if it would address a problem that occurs only once a week.”*
- *“Traditionally, urban highways are designed to provide for a LOS D or better in the design year. Recently, however, the transportation industry has begun to recognize that it is very difficult to achieve this without incurring enormous expense and/or creating significant adverse impacts on the surrounding community. If it is not feasible to provide for a LOS D for the highest peak hour(s), one factor that then becomes important is the number of hours of the day that the facility is projected to operate at a LOS E or F. For example, if a roadway is projected to*

operate at a LOS E or F with three lanes for three hours of the day, but is projected to operate at LOS D or better for the other 21 hours, it may be worthwhile to forgo the extra costs and impacts associated with increasing the design to a four-lane roadway just to achieve a minimum LOS D for all hours of the day."

It is essential that alternate solutions beyond adding lanes be seriously considered; Like yes, a by-pass from Portland NJ to Saylorsburg or Wind Gap, PA for truck traffic to reach where they need to go. And we need to find a way to take more cars off the highway, (thereby reducing pollution and increasing convenience) by providing more mass transit, shared autonomous vehicles, tele-commuting, and for that matter, more jobs, economic activity and local-regional resources right here so we don't have to travel so much.

In the words of renowned Civil Engineer Lewis Mumford in 1955, "Trying to cure traffic congestion by adding another lane is like trying to cure obesity by loosening your belt"

Building more lanes just makes it more convenient to perpetuate our old ways …. for a while. One study in Los Angeles showed that 4 years after highway lanes were added, they were at 90% of capacity. Without the extra lanes, people adjust their behaviour and travel at different times of day, different days of the week and consider alternative modes of travel. In 25 years from now, will drones be making lots of deliveries with less traffic ? Will we finally figure out and promote that trains are a very efficient way of moving lots of goods across the country ? We need to seriously explore options other than plowing a town to allow for more individual cars in a continuing spiral of paving paradise.

Creating a 5 points intersection in a pedestrian heavy area - is that safer? Closing Dreher Ave and Safer School House Exits and Entrances will cut off entire sections of the community from easy access to town, will decrease route options and increase emergency vehicle response times - is that safer ? or more convenient ? Creating a new interchange which feeds into a residential area where many kids walk to schools - is that safer? Creating a new interchange feeding more traffic onto a 2-lane Rt 611 - is that safer or more convenient ? Creating more lanes *for just a short segment of highway* - is that safer or more convenient ?

We are all pleased that federal highway money has been allocated for safety improvements to Route 80 in our area
It is a great opportunity to develop the best possible solutions and be an example of innovative transportation planning. We call on our elected officials to examine the details carefully & critically, to think outside the box, to not waste money on over-building and thereby maximize the benefits, while minimizing the negative impacts of this Route 80 project

The I-80 Project Impact AAA Task Force will continue to work for what's best for the community as a whole. Please call and write to your elected officials to express your own opinion. They need to hear from you right now before it's too late

For more information and to get involved, check out website www.i80projectimpactAAA.com , follow us on Facebook at I-80 Project Impact AAA. Contact us at i80projectimpactaaa@gmail.com We are available to do presentations for businesses, churches, civic and neighborhood groups etc.

Also see PennDOTs official website for the project, www.i80project.com and the Safe 80 Corridor study http://www.safe80.org/assets/I80_Corridor_Study.pdf
According to the Safe 80 Corridor Study Pg. 8 http://www.safe80.org/assets/I80_Corridor_Study.pdf The crash analysis conducted for the I-80 Corridor Study shows that

Segments in the EASTERN, urban section of I-80 were found to have crash rates either at or below the statewide average.
Crash rates for the WESTERN, rural section of the study area are twice the statewide average for similar transportation facilities.
These crashes were primarily rear-end crashes, fixed-object crashes, and deer-related crashes. A significant number of crashes appear to be speed-related as well.

According to PennDOT I-80 Project Website Purpose and Need section :
The highest average crash rate for crashes grouped by segment within the project area (obtained from PennDOT crash data) occurred in SLD segment 3050/3051 (US 209 ramps at Exit 304), with the crash rates reaching 0.84 (westbound) and 1.09 (eastbound).Using the PennDOT Query tool https://crashinfo.penndot.gov/PCIT/queryTool.html you can visually see the statistics up to the year 2017.