

Free ride on roads must end

by **Steven B. Bolt**

Considering the recent debate about transportation funding, some may be wondering whose responsibility it is to finance our roadway and transit systems. Well, if you live in Pennsylvania and drive its highways and bridges everyday, or use some form of public transit, then it is yours!

As a civil engineer in the state's transportation industry, I have an insider's view of the condition of the state's roads and bridges. Pennsylvania leads the nation in the number of structurally deficient bridges. Our roadways are deteriorating faster than they can be maintained. Mass-transit systems statewide are severely underfunded.

We are in the middle of the biggest debate in our history on how to fund this state's infrastructure network. No one wants to pay for what we so vitally need: an adequate network of highways and bridges that can sustain our economy and growth.

We all need to overcome the mentality of a "free ride," which is basically what we're getting right now. We expect everyone else to pay for what we take for granted. The last time we focused our collective energies on our transportation network, Eisenhower was in office. Today, other nations outspend the United States 10-1 on their infrastructure. Should we be surprised that their rate of economic growth dwarfs our own?

The federal stimulus bill was not enough to solve our problems. It was valuable in that it brought infrastructure needs to the public's eye along with job creation. It was a one-time shot in the arm, however, and simply not enough to solve problems of the magnitude we face.

In 2006, the Pennsylvania Transportation Funding Reform Commission (TFRC) identified a \$1.7 billion annual gap to make incremental improvements and \$2.1 billion to make those improvements and add limited traffic capacity. This is serious money - even more so in today's economy. We do not see any political will to increase the state gas tax (last raised in 1997), or enact any of the variety of funding measures outlined by the TFRC.

That leaves us with Act 44.

Passed by the legislature in 2007, Act 44 created a partnership between PennDOT and the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission specifically to help close the funding gap. Under Act 44, the Turnpike leverages toll revenues and provides PennDOT with supplemental funding for roads, bridges, and mass transit statewide. Basically, the Turnpike gets to toll Interstate 80. In return PennDot gets, on average, \$1.67 billion yearly over 50 years to spend on needs across the state.

The tolling of I-80, in addition to being a matter of state law, is critical to the revenue stream PennDOT so urgently needs right now. Without this crucial element, PennDOT's revenue stream from the Turnpike will decrease by \$472 million next year alone - with even deeper cuts in subsequent years.

Even with Act 44, we still need to find the public and political will to implement the findings of the TFRC - improving Pennsylvania's transportation network is a vital investment in the commonwealth's economic backbone.