

Despite "Pork" Criticism, I-99 Seen As a Major Economic Boost

Strategic plan needed, though

By Harry Zimbler

With the recent tragedy in Minneapolis – the collapse of a major bridge into the Mississippi River – spending on infrastructure has been leading many national and local newscasts. Once again, the wisdom of building I-99 has come into question, with some critics still claiming it is pure pork-barrel spending.

In the days following the Minneapolis bridge collapse, a CNN report featured the "Bud Shuster Highway," drawing a parallel between spending on roads like I-99 and the lack of spending on maintenance of bridges, tunnels, and other important infrastructure.

Leading economic development professionals in the region believe that comparison to be specious and disingenuous given the contributions that the roadway has already made to the economies of the three counties served by the highway. The promise of economic growth in the future, when the road is complete, appears even greater. In short, they argue, I-99 is not pork but a major factor in job creation.

"At this point it's a pile of rocks that need to be moved," quipped David Passmore, PhD, director of Penn State's Institute for Research in Training and Development. "I like to think of I-99 as a center of gravity for economic growth in the region"

"We are worried that people are being caught up in the problems with finishing the road and the social implications, that they are going to miss the economic potential," Passmore stated. "The fact is, I-99 is here and people in the region need to prepare for growth. There will be chaos without planning."

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Baker, program manager of Penn State's Workforce Assessment Center in Penn State Outreach, stated, "I-99 has already had an effect on the region's economy, especially in Bedford and Blair counties. The last little missing link is really going to open things up."

Passmore commented on the criticism that I-99 is "pork." "I think that many people see public utilities such as I-99 as being distant from them. It's hard to see how it will provide economic opportuni-



Overpass at the I-99 interchange with Rtes. 26 and 64 near Pleasant Gap

ties is supposed to do. Bring resources closer together."

"We must think strategically to leverage the road and the limited resources of the region," Baker added.

Passmore and Baker's written opinion detailed the following advantages of I-99:

- Decreased travel time in the region through higher traffic speeds
- Reduced travel time means lower travel costs and allows better and wider access to a workforce necessary for economic development along the corridor
- Reduced safety risks
- Among other rural road hazards, long-haul trucks make driving the region's narrow two-lane roads perilous.
- Lower vehicle operating costs from less time on the road
- Less travel congestion

The question is, will central Pennsylvania communities be ready to harness these competitive advantages?

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Both Martin Marasco, president and CEO of Altoona Blair County Development Corporation, and Bette Slayton, president of the Bedford County Development Association, agree that I-99 is already playing an important role in selling the region and making progress in economic development.

"We were completely isolated before I-99 was built," Marasco stated. "Look at all the projects that would not have happened without the road: REI in Bedford, the Wal-Mart Distribution Center, the Sheetz Distribution center, the Blair County Convention Center, even the Blair County ballpark. None of it would have happened. Transportation accessibility is critical. To criticize the roadway is ludicrous."

Slayton agreed. "New and fruitful rela-

tionships have developed because of I-99," she began. "More connections exist now, between Penn State and Centre, Blair and Bedford county businesses than ever before."

She noted that the I-99 Corridor Alliance (a consortium of Bedford County Economic Development Association, Altoona Blair County Development Corporation, Chamber of Business and Industry of Centre County, and Penn State) has been solidifying important partnerships.

"Here in Bedford County, some of our manufacturers have established relationships with Penn State's materials sciences research faculty and staff. In the life sciences, companies such as Lampire Biological Laboratories are benefiting from connections to Penn State."

There are also important synergies growing in areas such as logistics and transportation, and hospitality. "The management at the Bedford Springs Resort is very impressed with the hospitality program at Penn State," she said.

Numerous internships now exist in Bedford County, including one at Rockland Manufacturing.

"I-99 provides us access to a regional labor force," Slayton said. "Companies thinking about coming to an area look at the workforce within a 30- to 50-mile radius. This has really helped us with meeting labor force needs for new and existing companies. I-99 put us on the map with site selectors. The crossroad of I-99 and the Pennsylvania Turnpike is a real plus when we are recruiting new companies."

Former State Senator Robert Jubelirer noted that any lingering doubts about the importance of – and need for – I-99 should be dismissed. "For several decades, our area has seen concentrated efforts to hold onto jobs, to encourage local businesses to do their expansions locally, and to attract new enterprises," he explained. "The improving highway access – cemented by I-99 – has been a convincing part of our sales pitch!" -PBC



The intersection of Rte. 322 and I-99 taken in 2002

Photo provided by PennDOT

However, Passmore noted, the region needs to take a strategic approach to growth, or risk losing out on many opportunities.

Passmore and his colleague Rose Baker have authored an opinion on the roadway and how to make the most of it.

ties. So there will always be close scrutiny. It comes with the territory."

I-99 will continue to open up the region's "labor shed," Passmore noted. "It will make the pool of workers larger. It will also lower the costs of doing business in the region. That's what a highway like I-99