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Crack Forces PennDOT to Close Section of I-95

Philadelphia Daily News - March 18, 2008

PHILADELPHIA - A busy section of I-95 in Philadelphia was shut down this week after an inspection revealed an almost four-foot long, two-inch wide crack in one of the support columns under the highway between Allegheny and Girard Avenues. The emergency closure of the 2-mile stretch of highway brought delays to an estimated 180,000 motorists, while the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation erects four steel columns to surround the concrete pillar.

An inspection of the bridge last October showed the column to be in "poor" condition, with the overall viaduct rated as "structurally deficient," however the findings were not critical enough at the time to warrant immediate repairs. PennDOT engineers believed the bridge could wait until this summer for repairs and the planned reconstruction in 2012.

The engineer from Specialty Engineering in Bensalem who had inspected the bridge last fall happened to be in the area, and returned to the bridge to look at it again when he discovered the crack had grown significantly in the last five months. PennDOT spokesman Gene Blaum said the affected section of I-95 was constructed in the 1960's and is among the structures needing \$1 billion in repairs on the highway between Cottman Avenue and Vine Street.

This is not the first close call on I-95, according to Charles Davies, assistant district engineer for design at PennDOT's southeastern district. "No doubt, there are other locations on 95 that would

rate poor condition, and yes, there are a lot of structurally deficient bridges on 95. It's a constant challenge to keep up with," Davies said, noting that the worsening condition of bridges like I-95 is a result of "lack of overall resources put into infrastructure. We're making the best calls we can. But we may not always be right."

Gov. Backs DOT Chief after Investigation

Albuquerque Journal - March 15, 2008

N. Mexico - The New Mexico governor's office continues to support Transportation Secretary Rhonda Fought, despite its release last week of a callous critique of the department's failure to revitalize its headquarters and district offices in Santa Fe. Following a recent investigation conducted by the Transportation Department's Office of Inspector General and outside counsel brought in by Governor Bill Richardson, the governor's office said the DOT projects "suffered from poor planning and poor decisions, which resulted in a fatally flawed process."

In a letter to the governor last week, Fought placed much of the blame of the headquarters project on a prominent local law firm, which was hired by the DOT in 2005 to provide advice on the redevelopments, which were expected to cost hundreds of millions of dollars. The law firm was paid nearly \$1.1 million, however Fought said she has canceled the contract and requested an audit of all billings. "The issues outlined in the report are primarily procurement issues and fall squarely on the legal services contracted with the legal contractor."

Although Fought said many critical decisions about projects were made by lawyers, which should have been probed by the DOT more deeply, the governor appeared to have faith in the secretary's work. "The governor is satisfied that Secretary Fought has taken the appropriate responsibility for mistakes made during the course of the project, and she is taking the necessary steps to restore the public trust in the Department of Transportation," Richardson chief of staff James Jimenez said.

FHWA Docks Reimbursement for Faulty Concrete Testing

Providence Journal - March 13, 2008

Rhode Island - The Federal Highway Administration has docked Rhode Island \$3.1 million in federal reimbursement for failing to test some of the concrete on the \$610 million construction of a new section of Route 195 through Providence. The FHWA is taking an additional \$679,399 over issues relating to the steel on the new bridge over Providence River.

Governor Donald L. Carcieri backed the state department of transportation, however, saying there is no indication of "wrongdoing," in the faulty concrete testing, "People just weren't doing their jobs." The governor said he is waiting for the current internal DOT review to be completed before he placed blame.

The FHWA, said they were not challenging the safety of the work; however, at least 64 structures that support bridges and ramps on the Route 195 project contain concrete not tested for strength, which violates several state and federal regulations. In a letter last August to DOT Director Jerome F. Williams, the FHWA said the DOT's concrete sampling and testing "was found

to be non-compliant" with the department's own regulations in place from 2005 to early 2007.

Road Funding Bill Speeds through Louisiana Legislature

Advocate Capitol News Bureau - March 17, 2008

Louisiana - Highway supporters won a major victory last week when lawmakers passed a bill gradually increasing state funding for transportation by \$255 million per year. Senate Bill 11 was approved unanimously in the House, and with 38 out of 39 votes in the Senate just before lawmakers concluded their six-day special session.

One of Gov. Bobby Jindal's top priorities for the session, the bill will move sales tax dollars from car and truck sales into a dedicated transportation fund, instead of funding various other state services. The increase would equal \$42 million in the fiscal year beginning July 1, and rise to \$255 million in five years. In seven years, the bill would send about \$320 million annually in new funding for roads and bridges.

The Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development would determine new state transportation spending through priority lists. After more than a year of trying, "This is a move in the right direction," said Jennifer Marusak, spokesperson for Driving Louisiana Forward, which represents highway contractors and others backing the bill. Chamber of commerce officials worked with Marusak's group for several months last year on a similar bill, which died in the Senate after opposition from former governor Kathleen Blanco.

Lawmakers Want to Lower Gas Tax

The Southern, IL - Mar 15, 2008

Illinois - With the cost of crude oil hitting record highs, Illinois lawmakers are hoping to give their constituents some relief from the resulting high prices at the gas pumps. The state's 19-cent-per-gallon gas tax makes gas prices in Illinois some of the highest in the nation, and some lawmakers do not believe that is going to change very soon.

State Rep. Mike Bost, R-Murphysboro, said the topic of lowering the gas tax is discussed regularly but has not had serious consideration. "This is something talked about nearly every day between the Republicans," he said. "We need to provide relief. Without it, the disparity between the state borders like Missouri, Indiana and Kentucky keeps getting greater and greater."

Bost, who formerly ran Bost Trucking Services, said the high gas prices are driving many companies to fill up outside the state. "How many hundreds of thousands of gallons are we losing a day because truckers stop in St. Louis or outside Illinois?" he said. "And when you don't stop to get fuel, you don't stop to get a meal or all those other things we sell that are revenue generators."



A couple of thoughts - first, every state legislature thinks their gas tax is one of the highest in the country. Most often they forget to add in various other

provisions that impact the total like local option fuel taxes, sales tax on fuel, surcharges for environmental issues, etc. Go to the link below this comment and see a good summary by state. Second, when a trucker fills up in an adjacent state the only loss to the state is the revenue associated with the fuel sale. The taxes are shared from state to state based on travel in the state--not where the fuel was purchased. In referencing the purchase issue the legislator is really supporting a position held by truck stop operators who sell fuel in Illinois. TW

http://www.bts.gov/publications/state_transportation_statistics/state_transportation_statistics_2006/html/table_06_12.html (See Table 6-12)

Local Organizations to Help Fund Rail Study

Livingston Daily, MI - Mar 18, 2008

Michigan - Local governments and agencies have expressed interest in contributing to a so-called "verification study" on a proposed commuter rail line between Ann Arbor and Howell in Michigan. The Livingston County Board of Commissioners has said the county has tentatively proposed to contribute \$15,000 to the study, although two board committees must obtain approval along with the full board before it is approved.

Other entities that may be interested in donating are the Ann Arbor Transportation Authority, the Ann Arbor and Howell downtown development authorities, the University of Michigan, the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, Great Lakes Central Railroad (which would operate the service), Hamburg township, the city of Howell, Washtenaw County and the city of Ann Arbor.

Bill Rogers, Chairman of the Livingston County Board of Commissioners, said bidding for the contract may open within the next few weeks. County commissioners were somewhat skeptical of the budget numbers provided by the project organizer, and requested a more detailed study.

"We got what we were fighting for," said Commissioner Jack LaBelle. "I believe we will get a true picture of what the costs are and what the implications are."

Poll finds Support for Wider Roads, Transit

Charlotte Observer, N.C. - March 17, 2008

N.C. - North Carolina residents overwhelmingly agree widening roads and improving public transportation are the top ways to fight traffic congestion, but highway tolls are not the best way to pay for them, according to a recent poll. Over eighty-percent support these ways of addressing congestion, and 72 percent and 73 percent agree with building more roads and increasing park and ride lots, respectively, as shown in the poll results from a survey taken by Elon University.

Strong support was also reported for rail systems (72 percent), high-speed trains between the largest cities in the state (70 percent) and regional rail (64 percent). To pay for the rail, 67 percent of respondents favored extra fees. To fund bridge work and other transportation projects,

66 percent supported a \$2 billion statewide bond issue.

Tolls were opposed by 63 percent, and a majority also opposed car registration increases (59 percent), mileage-based fees (78 percent) and increased license renewal fees (64 percent). Other options proved more favorable, with 74 percent agreeing with impact fees on developers to pay for local road construction, and 59 percent supporting weight fees on trucks to pay for transportation.

State DOT Uncovers \$848M for Projects

Florida Times-Union, FL - Mar 19, 2008

Georgia - The Georgia Department of Transportation has discovered an extra \$848 million in funding tied up in projects either delayed or closed, with about \$56 million funding projects that were ready but waiting for cash. "We're cleaning up the books," DOT Commissioner Gena Abraham told the agency's board.

The result of this week's announcement will enable the department to accelerate hundreds of projects or cover cost overruns on projects due to contract changes, which occurs in about 35 percent of the 700 or so projects ongoing at any given time, typically increasing the cost. These contract changes will cost the department \$310 million in the current fiscal year alone.

"The good news," said Abraham, "is that in fact from a percentage standpoint, we're well below the nation average on changes to contracts. But what we're not doing well on is the time to process these agreements. And the thing that keeps a contractor moving is money. If you're slow with the payment and ... with supplemental agreements, that's definitely going to affect how quickly we can get projects done."

Abraham was hired specifically to improve the department's speed in completing projects, particularly by reducing the number of projects pending. In 2006, her predecessor, Harold Linnenkohl, established a six-person team to search for stalled projects that could be closed to free up cash for other projects. The team has so far closed 4,700 projects and freed up funds from completed phases of 2,200 others, for a total of \$848 million.

Colo. Legislators Pushing \$5 Interstate Toll

Houston Chronicle - March 19, 2008

DENVER - Republican officials in Colorado are pushing for a \$5 toll on I-70 to pay for adding more lanes to the highway. House Minority Leader Mike May and Senate Minority Leader Andy McElhany said this week they are putting together a bill that would institute a toll each way on the interstate from the Eisenhower Tunnel to Floyd Hill on the outskirts of Denver.

Residents in the counties surrounding I-70, Gilpin, Summit and Clear Creek, would be exempt from the toll, which applies to all other passenger cars and trucks. The bill's supporters estimate the toll would raise approximately \$40 million annually, which could be put toward borrowing \$1

billion to widen I-70 between U.S. 40 and Floyd Hill.

May believes people would be more supportive of having the drivers who use the road pay for it than making everyone pay by imposing a tax. McElhany said he is not concerned about the effect the toll might have on the trucking industry. "I think traffic not moving and a three-hour traffic jam is much worse for business," McElhany said.

Another proposal is in the works to designate one or all lanes of the interstate as toll lanes during the busiest travel times, while allowing cars with three or more passengers to travel free. The amount of the toll is not specified in the proposal. Both proposals face a hard road ahead - the state would have to get a federal waiver to institute tolls on an existing roadway, and residents living near the highway have expressed anger that supporters haven't worked with them or asked for their say in the expansion.

L.A. City Council Rejects Massive Development

Los Angeles Times - March 20, 2008

California - In a split vote, the Los Angeles City Council voted to reject a 5,553-home Las Lomas development because of the heavy impact it would have on the nearby 5 and 14 freeways. Officials, who have rarely outright rejected a development proposal, voted 10-5 to halt the processing of the application by the Planning Department.

"This project would have put 15,000 cars a day in an already heavily impacted area," said City Councilman Greig Smith, who represents the northwest San Fernando Valley. "The people of L.A. said we can't take that anymore. We're tired of it." The rejection represented a major victory for Smith, who contended that the council did not need to review a project that would overwhelm the region with traffic and yet is not within city limits.

Some city council members fear a lawsuit from the Las Lomas Land Co., who has spent \$20 million since 2002 trying to get the project approved. Las Lomas defenders on the city council say the city already made a promise to review the proposal. "Our city attorney has said that if we fail to move forward, he believes we are in great jeopardy of being sued," said Councilman Richard Alarcon, whose San Fernando Valley district borders the Las Lomas site.

Dan Palmer, president of Las Lomas Land Co., said he was disappointed in the council's decision because his company had worked hard to make the development environmentally sound, and following the city's "smart growth" strategy - to build greater density along transit corridors and fill in gaps in existing urban areas. Palmer said he has not yet decided on his next move.



With all California is doing to deal with carbon impacts, congestion, and growth, there is an inevitable collision between public policy, public property rights and development. Watch it carefully because if it hasn't yet come to a neighborhood in your area, it will. TW

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