

## Future of funding for PennDOT uncertain

By Matthew Santoni  
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PennDOT will continue to use federal stimulus money on many major highway projects this year, but leaner times are ahead unless solutions are found for funding crises on the horizon.

Some of the biggest projects in the region this year were paid for with Pennsylvania's \$1 billion share of transportation funding in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act; others were "backfilled" with state money freed up by the federal stimulus spending.

The \$23.3 million rehabilitation of the Fort Duquesne Bridge in Pittsburgh was rushed through design and engineering to nab some of the stimulus. Work began last year on the ramps leading to and from the double-decker highway bridge, but PennDOT plans to close one deck for up to a week this spring or summer.

Stimulus money also paid for projects such as the \$21.8 million rearrangement of a hiking trail, bridge piers and railroad tracks at the intersection of Route 28 and the 31st Street Bridge. Moving them all closer to the river will make room for a future project to build a "diamond" interchange that will allow through-traffic to bypass the long traffic light at the bridge.

In Beaver County, work will continue on the \$12.2 million, stimulus-funded rehabilitation of the Rochester Bridge over the Beaver River, as well as the \$20.6 million project to rehab the Shippingport Bridge over the Ohio River, funded with state and federal highway money.

The stimulus also will pay for the \$14 million rehabilitation of the Memorial Bridge over the Youghioheny River in Connellsville; the \$4.2 million rehabilitation of Route 422 over the Route 28 ramps in East Franklin, Armstrong County; the \$5 million Harmony Junction Bridge replacement over Connoquenessing Creek in Butler County; and \$10.6 million worth of interchange upgrades, additional lanes and new signs to make Route 60 through Lawrence County into an extension of Interstate 376.

But the state still is waiting for word on whether the Federal Highway Administration will let the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission charge tolls on Interstate 80. Without the revenue from I-80, the turnpike's annual transfers of toll money to PennDOT's coffers will drop from \$900 million in 2009 to \$450 million this year. The turnpike partially funded the transfers with borrowed money that it expected to be repaid with I-80 tolls.

"We're moving forward with what we have," said Jim Struzzi, spokesman for PennDOT District 11. "The future, as far as funding goes, is uncertain."

Another issue is federal legislation that determines how transportation money is divided. Federal funding expired in September, and Congress has passed several resolutions extending funding at 2009 levels. Another extension is expected to postpone any increases until after the 2010 elections, but a new jobs bill could give states extra grants for highway projects.

The uncertainty on those issues leaves the transportation construction industry struggling to plan for the future, said Jason Wagner, director of policy and government relations for the Associated Pennsylvania Constructors, a trade group representing large construction companies. PennDOT has promised to put out about \$1.8 billion in contracts this year, but if I-80 doesn't bring in toll revenue, that could drop to \$1.2 billion at the beginning of 2011, he said.

"With that kind of drop-off in funding, any employees you added during the 2009 work would be short-lived and unsustainable," he said. "It affects contractors' planning for equipment purchasing and training."

Federal stimulus money freed up other state and federal funding that will go toward the \$25 million to \$40 million widening of Route 28 between the 31st Street Bridge in Pittsburgh and the 40th Street Bridge in Millvale.

PennDOT is seeking between \$25 million and \$35 million in state and federal money to replace the Charleroi-Monessen Bridge, which has been closed to traffic since February 2009 because of deterioration.

A project to put a new deck on the Freeport Bridge over the Allegheny River and rebuild the piers for its approach spans is expected to begin in the spring, and will cost \$65 million to \$80 million in state and federal highway funding, depending on contractors' bids.

In Greene County, a small bridge on the southern edge of Waynesburg will be replaced to carry Route 218 over Ten Mile Creek and eliminate an at-grade railroad crossing.

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