



Monroe County Industrial Development Authority

Testimony

Charles A. Leonard

Honorable Chairman, and committee members. My name is Charles Leonard and I am the Executive Director of the Monroe County Industrial Development Authority, the primary economic development organization within Monroe County. I bring you greetings from the Commissioners of Monroe County, Janet Weidensaul chairperson, Greg Christine and James Cadue. I am pleased to have the opportunity to appear before you today regarding transportation issues and their impact upon economic development in the state of Pennsylvania.

In Monroe County, our perception on issues pertaining to transportation and economic developments are influenced by rapid and ever increasing population growth. Over the last two decades Monroe County has had one of the fastest growing populations in Pennsylvania. New residents have moved to Monroe County at a rate that exceeds all but one county in Pennsylvania – our neighbor to the north, Pike County.

When this rapid increase in the rate of in-migration to Monroe County began in the 1970's, our population was around 40,000. We were, and still remain to a great extent, a rural community highly reliant upon the tourist industry for much of our employment base and local income. But our estimated population now exceeds 125,000.

Economically, Monroe County has been a statistical star over the last 30 years when compared with other counties in Pennsylvania. We have one of Pennsylvania's most rapidly developing economies. Our net job creation rate has exceeded that of all counties in our region over the last 30 years.

But, while our rate of job creation and the growth of our local economy have been superior, we are also confronted by the fact that our creation of new jobs has not stayed abreast of our rapidly increasing population. In regard to raw numbers, Monroe County added more net people to our population than any other county. There are simply too few jobs for so many people. The result has been an unemployment rate that has exceeded the state and national averages throughout the 1990's, and of

our total workforce of about 50,000, approximately 9,000 of our Monroe County residents commute to NJ and NY for work opportunities.

The many new residents in combination with the traffic generated by our vibrant tourist industry, have seriously stressed our rural infrastructure. Good highways are a key in assuring easy access to tourist destinations. Good roads are critical to attracting new businesses, additional employers, and more jobs. Congestion and the attendant delays can discourage vacation travelers and new businesses.

The influx of new residents has placed considerable burdens on not only our transportation system but also upon other public services including the schools. In many communities the impact has been dramatic. For many individual residents tax rates have as much as quadrupled since 1980.

Over the last 20 years Monroe County has undertaken a variety of analyses to determine how we can best manage our growth. Each of these studies has clearly delineated the need to diversify our economy by attracting new businesses and industrial uses. The tourist industry remains a critical industry; one that we must continue to nurture and grow. But the

analyses have identified the need to attract new types of employers and additional tax ratable business in order to successfully attain the equilibrium necessary to a vital and robust economy.

Monroe County's location provides us some unique advantages in regard to the attraction and retention of business and industry. We are blessed by the fact that East – West travelers on Route 80 enter Monroe County first when arriving in Pennsylvania. This “market-access” factor provides us with a selling point whether we are pitching to the company that desires to be as close to the Northeastern marketplace as possible, or the family planning a weekend of skiing. This market access is absolutely dependent upon the transportation system.

Of course, this proximity to the marketplace is primarily a function of the interstate system. To retain Pennsylvania business and to attract the new industries we need for the future, we must confront our extreme congestion and assure an adequate system of state and local roads providing access to that system.

In twenty years of economic development work, within Pennsylvania, I have never worked with a company that was willing to re-locate on the promise of future roads or infrastructure. It must be in place. We must be willing to invest the dollars necessary to adequately prepare for the future we desire for Pennsylvania. Roads are an investment that must be made if we are to compete for the jobs of the future.

Any discussion of the symbiotic relationship between economic development and transportation must include air travel. For some companies air travel availability is a mere convenience issue, but for many it is an absolute necessity. As firms have become more globally involved the availability of quality air service has increased in importance to business decision makers.

Monroe County has adequate access to commercial flights via Lehigh Valley International, Avoca and, Newark, NJ. But the most critical airport to us from a business retention and attraction standpoint is the general

aviation airport in Coolbaugh Township known as the Mount Pocono Municipal Airport.

Our Pocono Mountains Industrial Park is immediately adjacent to this facility and we market the airport as an amenity. Many local corporate enterprises have occasion to use the facility but some have indicated that if it weren't for the airport they would seek an alternative location. Our largest private sector employer, Pasteur Merieux Connaught, uses the services of this local airport more than 150 times per year. We estimate that the airport is an asset that helps us retain thousands of Monroe County jobs. We urge the state of Pennsylvania to continue to recognize these small airport facilities as critical assets to job creation and retention.

Paul Canevari has mentioned the importance of rail service to our community. We echo all that he has said. We believe that the improvement of rail service to our area can only enhance our promising future.

In regard to passenger rail, we believe that the state needs to view rail as an alternative to highway transportation. In the future we believe that we will have the growth that will require us to seek transportation alternatives

and we believe that it will enhance our local economy while helping to conserve our quality of life.

We believe Pennsylvania should assume a leadership role in the effort.

The development of our transportation resources will determine the future of Pennsylvania. To assure a healthy economy we must make a commitment to assuring an excellent transportation network. Economic Development and Transportation are inextricably linked. We applaud the committees for recognizing that out of transportation infrastructure, economic development will grow. We thank you for the opportunity to present before you today. I would be happy to answer any of your questions.

The following are some specific recommendations.

1. The legislature should support an increase in the allocation to the Infrastructure Development Program. This program is chronically underfunded and is of critical importance to rural communities.
2. State agencies should be encouraged to re-evaluate the criteria used to access state infrastructure programs. High wages that commuters bring back to Monroe County and other statistical anomalies serve to overstate municipal well being in Monroe and Pike, (e.g. Lack of reciprocation with NY limits income to municipalities which still must deliver public services).
3. Two overpasses across Route 80 are too low to accommodate many special loads that are being shipped via truck. Implementation of these two projects should proceed as soon as possible.
4. The Marshall's Creek Bypass which is planned to get underway soon, is a critical project for Monroe County. Congestion in this area has suppressed property values and deterred development. The commencement of this project is critical to revitalizing this area of our County.