

## **Update on the Turnpike Expansion Project**

Report by Kathleen Keohane

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The turnpike expansion project came to a screeching halt on March 19 when the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission (PTC) announced the suspension of the road widening project through Tredyffrin. The official reason given for postponing the widening project: "a major cost increase ...to meet the demands for alternative stormwater- control methods...would increase overall construction costs by as much as 50 percent." Translation: Tredyffrin 's request that the PTC provide a better stormwater plan - one that takes less private property and keeps runoff close to the roadway - is not in the budget.

A little research will produce thousands of examples of "alternative methods" in use throughout the country. Some proposed by Tredyffrin engineer, Steve Burgo - such as in-line, underground detention basins and a spray irrigation system are currently in use in other parts of Chester County.

The unexpected news coincided with turnover in the turnpike leadership. Governor Rendell fired Turnpike Chairman Mitchell Rubin on March 23 after learning that Rubin was the target of an FBI investigation. He allegedly accepted \$150,000 of taxpayer money from former state Senator Vince Fumo for no-work contracts. On the same day, Rendell appointed long-time ally from Philadelphia, attorney A. Michael Pratt to serve out Rubin's term as commissioner. Vice-Chair Tim Carson will act as Chair in the interim.

Much has happened since the beginning of the year. In January the Turnpike Commission presented its much awaited preliminary design plan at an Open House at the Vanguard School. Those viewing the 60-foot-long display were pleased to see sound walls included along the entire south side of the turnpike and in populous areas along the north side. The walls were recommended by sound engineers who had measured traffic noise along the turnpike in Tredyffrin.

However, most residents were unprepared for the scope of the PTC's stormwater management plan, which marked 97 properties for takings. It included the demolition of eight homes and the construction of large, above-ground drainage basins on these properties. The proposed basins were shown in close proximity to homes.

The PTC had sought no input from Township officials and provided them with little advance notice of the plan. Residents of the properties marked for demolition were accorded even less - just three days' notice before the Open House. Most of these homeowners are senior citizens for whom losing their homes will present a real hardship. They were shocked at the prospect of losing their homes.

A month after the Open House, turnpike representatives sponsored a Roundtable Meeting on February 26 to hear feedback on their preliminary plan. Representatives from the Township and community came with many concerns. They grilled turnpike engineers about the stormwater management methods chosen for the expansion. They expressed their dissatisfaction with the amount of residential property to be taken and the TP decision to construct a 26 foot median instead of the 10-foot median used in other widening projects along the turnpike. However, participants of the Roundtable left feeling that the dialogue had been constructive and their concerns were heard.

Going forward, a meeting between Congressman Gerlach, Valley Forge National Park officials and the Township was scheduled for March 26 to discuss using spray irrigation to disperse

turnpike runoff. And another Roundtable Meeting was scheduled for April 23 to discuss the type of absorptive sound walls to be used.

Good progress was being made until March 19, when all scheduled meetings were cancelled, and the timetable stopped. Specifically, the PTC has postponed all activity except for bridge work, which will continue as scheduled. The bridge over the turnpike at Valley Forge Road was demolished early on, March 22 and will remain closed until construction is complete in November 2009. According to PTC's chief engineer Frank Kempf, the bridge at Mill Road also will be demolished as scheduled and rebuilt to accommodate a six-lane highway during 2010.

Also postponed is any new construction work at the Valley Forge service plaza, as well as work on the Route 29 slip ramp, a separate project that began 10 years ago. The slip ramp had received all necessary approvals from East Whiteland Township and the Department of Environmental Protection, was permitted and set to begin this spring.

What happens next? On April 23<sup>th</sup>, State Senator Andy Dinniman will have a meeting with Turnpike officials and local elected representatives to try and get the Route 29 slip project back on track. He is requesting that the Turnpike Commission resume planning discussions on the expansion as well.