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### Insane inaction on Pa. transportation mess

The tale has been oft told of an intellectually bereft Pennsylvania Legislature forcing the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission to go into deep debt to help fund mass transit in this commonwealth.

The result has been year-after-year toll increases to cover that debt. And though the annual obligation has been slashed as of late – from \$450 million to \$50 million (until 2057) -- the debt remains massive, as a new analysis by the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy recounts.

“According to the latest Comprehensive Annual Financial Report ... the amount of mainline debt outstanding at the (Turnpike Commission) was \$14.31 billion, as of May 31, 2021,” notes Frank Gamrat, executive director of the Pittsburgh think tank (in *Policy Brief Vol. 22, No. 3*).

“This represents an increase of over 760 percent since the passage of Act 44 of 2007,” he says. That’s the legislative chicanery that, let’s be honest, codified intra-agency five-fingering and has been a major player in the commission’s financial struggles.

And that’s even though the Turnpike Commission has taken steps to cut costs, most notably with its move to make all toll collections electronic.

The same, however, cannot said for at least one of the mass-transit agencies that have come to depend on the turnpike’s debt-fueled largess to fund its operations. That would be the Port Authority of Allegheny County.

“No serious consideration was given to reducing costs or improving efficiencies in the way transportation is provided,” reminds Gamrat, a Ph.D. economist.

“Many [Allegheny Institute] *Policy Briefs* have documented the expensive Port Authority ... which receives a large allocation of state funding, yet nothing has been done in that area to reducing the system’s outlandish compensation packages,” he says.

And, we must note, *adding* employees at a time when ridership has tanked largely because of Covid-19 pandemic-related issues -- but it being unclear when or even if “normal” ridership might ever return.

To wit, the Port Authority has laid off no employees during the pandemic but has added 32 jobs – 27 administrative – primarily to implement the agency’s dubious pie-in-the-sky \$3.8 billion, 25-year strategic plan called Nextransit.

One of the projects would extend the light-rail system on the near North Side and to the North Hills. Never mind that the authority has no funding assured to do so and never mind that light-rail remains the least efficient way to move the public in all but the densest urban settings.

It is a charade that is not sustainable. Yet public dollars, even borrowed and threatening another transportation mode, continue to be thrown at the Port Authority.

“And now, nearly 15 years after the failed attempt to fix transportation funding through Act 44, the commonwealth is back again with the same problem,” Gamrat says. “The latest proposed solutions are to tax vehicles on a per-mile-driven basis and tolling interstate bridges to fund their replacement.

“Yet, there’s still no discussion of costs and efficiencies,” he laments.

And the definition of insanity is?

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