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Mon-Fayette Opposition Study Contains Major Mistakes

The debate over the Mon-Fayette Expressway is becoming heated as decision time for the last leg of the project approaches. Controversy is to be expected and there are opposition arguments that deserve a good answer from Expressway proponents. However, the latest assault on the project by the Penn Future group warrants a sharp retort. Their recently released report makes assertions and reaches conclusions that do not withstand careful scrutiny.

Penn Future's report basically dismisses the need for the new road by arguing that the primary purpose of the highway, to boost industrial redevelopment in the Mon Valley, can never be realized. Why? According to them there will be no industrial job growth in the region. Indeed, they forecast that Southwest Pennsylvania's industrial jobs will decline by 35 percent from now through 2025. And, beyond that dismal prognosis, the Penn Future report places total regional employment gains through 2025 at only 59,180, a mere 5 percent above current levels.

Clearly, these numbers are dreadfully pessimistic. As slow as regional job growth has been over the last decade, it has still averaged almost one percent per year. Continued expansion at that very slow rate would still generate almost 180,000 jobs, three times the numbers used by Penn Future in their analysis.

It turns out Penn Future used Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission (SPC) projections that were made almost three years ago. Those figures called for a greater than 200,000 jobs increase over the 25 year forecast horizon but were front loaded for the 1999-2002 period when they expected a huge jump in jobs attributable in part to completion of the Mon-Fayette Expressway, followed by a dramatic slowdown after that. Penn Future's analysis took the post 2002 slowdown in growth as their baseline forecast.

This is an obvious misuse of the numbers. Since the expected surge in jobs accompanying the work on the completion of the Mon-Fayette did not happen between 1999 and 2002, the SPC would of necessity need to reformulate their outlook for the next 23 years. They will almost surely revise their long term job forecast upwards. In short, Penn Future failed to do a reasonableness check on the numbers they used.

It is not sufficient to justify using a forecast that is so gloomy and represents such a radical departure from recent performance by saying that it is the official SPC projection. Researchers need to take a harder and deeper look than that. Careful examination would have revealed the source of the strangely low numbers for 2002-2025.

Beyond this misuse of SPC numbers, the Penn Future report commits a serious error in logic. They say we don't need a new road to boost industrial development because there won't be any development. On the other hand, proponents of the Expressway argue that the road is a strategic element of needed infrastructure that will facilitate moving people and goods through the Valley and beyond. Without better, faster, more efficient surface transportation that includes multilane roadways, there is little hope of ever getting industry to locate in the Mon Valley. Obviously, no one can guarantee industrial redevelopment will follow automatically upon completion of the new roadway. However, it is a sure bet that absent the Expressway, or something very much like it, there will be no meaningful redevelopment in the Mon Valley. If opponents can block the Expressway, their claim that no industrial development will occur becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Penn Future is on much more solid ground in arguing about esthetics, community disruption and even the environment. Their economic case against the Expressway doesn't pass muster.

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