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## LEGISLATIVE ACTION ALERT

### Pennsylvania Turnpike moving ahead with new road to bypass Allegheny Tunnel in Somerset County

ED BLAZINA Pittsburgh Post-Gazette©

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According to an article posted on line by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, after identifying serious shortcomings with the Pennsylvania Turnpike's Allegheny Tunnel in Somerset County nearly 25 years ago, the agency has settled on a preferred plan to build a new road around the existing structure. But don't count on driving on the proposed \$332.4 million bypass road south of the tunnel any time soon. The project is going through environmental review now, followed by three to four years of design and — once the agency finds the money — about three years for construction.

A quick history lesson on the project: In 1995, turnpike inspectors identified a series of problems with the tunnel. Those included the condition of the tunnel; high traffic volume and accident rates; sharp curves approaching from the west that no longer meet design standards; and the fact that trucks carrying hazardous loads aren't permitted in the tunnel.

Like many road projects, what to do about those problems went through many stops and starts due to funding and concerns from some neighboring property owners. But after the most recent start in 2010, turnpike engineers and designers have been pushing to find a workable solution.

With the westbound tunnel dating to the turnpike's original construction in 1939 and the eastbound portal added in 1965, the agency decided it would be too expensive and too disruptive to upgrade the existing facilities. Instead, it developed a series of options that were presented at a public meeting in Somerset last month as part of the environmental review process.

Officials presented three pairs of options, each with a new tunnel and new road: a part to the north with a projected cost of \$761 million for a new tunnel and \$384.9 million for a new road; a different northern route that would cost \$702.1 million for a tunnel and \$378 million for a road; and a southern option that would cost \$627.9 million for a tunnel and \$332.4 million for a new road.

Matthew Burd, special projects manager for the turnpike, said the agency prefers the option of building the southern road, which would be cut into the mountain about 1,000 feet south of the tunnel. Not only is it the least expensive option, it has the fewest environmental concerns from the Indiana bat habitat and wetlands and would involve taking the fewest amount of homes, several near the western end of the tunnel. "None of these is a silver bullet that will fix all of the problems," Mr. Burd said. "It's not a one-size-fits-all solution, but we feel it has the best options."

Mr. Burd described the path shown during last month's public meeting as "a pretty good snapshot" of the proposed path but stressed that it is "very, very preliminary." The exact location could shift once designers and engineers do test borings and other preliminary work to determine the condition of the land that would be used for the new highway, he said.

Plans call for three eastbound lanes to allow a climbing lane due to the sharp incline in the that area and redesigning the sharp curves approaching the tunnel from the east to meet current standards. The existing curves have a 55 mph speed limit in an area where 70 mph is permitted.

Although the project is moving ahead, Mr. Burd said the turnpike will be trying to identify construction funding. It doesn't know yet whether the agency will have the money

when the design is finished or will have to wait several years for construction until the funding is identified.

While the agency proceeds with the lengthy process of pursuing the bypass, it also has to maintain the existing tunnel. The commission last week approved a \$20.7 million contract with Mosites Construction Co. to replace the tunnel's lighting and conduit, which spokesman Carl DeFebo said was a safety concern and needed to be done this year. Mosites will work overnight on one tunnel at a time with traffic shifted to the other tunnel in both directions.

The decision to proceed with the Allegheny bypass follows a review last year of the possibility of grouping upgrades of

all five turnpike tunnels under one contract as part of a public-private partnership, where the contractor would upgrade the facilities and be responsible for maintenance for 30 years. Although that approach could have upgraded all of the tunnels in five to six years, the agency decided the upfront cost of about \$350 million was too expensive at a time when it is dealing with debts of more than \$12 billion.

As a result, the turnpike began a four-year, \$110 million rehabilitation of the Tuscarora Tunnel at the Huntingdon-Franklin County line in December. Beginning at 9 p.m. Sunday, the eastbound tube will close from Sunday evenings until noon on Fridays through June. Traffic will use the westbound tunnel in both directions during that time.

## Proposed turnpike tunnel bypass

The Pennsylvania Turnpike is pursuing a project that would eliminate the Allegheny Tunnel by building a road into the side of the mountain south of the tunnel. The project is going through environmental approval now and will take about four years to design and three years to build once it is funded.



Sources: Esri, Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission

Ed Yozwick/Post-Gazette