

PA Turnpike Announces Design Restart for Scranton Beltway Project

I-81/I-476 connections advance as Turnpike's transit-funding obligation is slashed.

PITTSTON TOWNSHIP, LUZERNE COUNTY, PA (DEC. 10, 2021) – State Rep. Mike Carroll, Democratic Chair of the Pennsylvania House Transportation Committee, joined leaders from the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission (PTC) and other transportation officials to announce that the engineering-design work on the Scranton Beltway Project has resumed now that the PTC has largely been released from a 2007 state mandate to provide \$450 million annually to PennDOT to fund transit operations statewide.

"I am glad to be here today to announce that the PA Turnpike Commission has agreed to restart design work on the Scranton Beltway after a hiatus," Rep. Carroll said. "The project had been stalled because the Commission was forced to cut capital spending to comply with the law to fund transit."

This \$160 million project involves building highway-speed ramps between Interstate 81 and the Turnpike's Northeastern Extension to form a seamless beltway around Scranton. A joint undertaking involving the PTC and PennDOT Engineering District 4, the beltway will be formed by two connections linking the Turnpike and I-81 — one south of Scranton in Dupont Borough and Pittston Township, and a second connection north of Scranton in South Abington Township.

"The concept of the Scranton Beltway emerged years ago with discussions among the region's leaders to address critical transportation infrastructure needs, specifically for congestion on I-81," Rep. Carroll said. "The project provides a vital alternative route to keep traffic moving during incidents or weather-related shutdowns as well as an interstate-to-interstate option enabling drivers to cut travel times."

The PTC's obligation to provide the Commonwealth with supplemental transportation funding was a result of PA Act 44 of 2007. Because of Act 89 of 2013, the PTC's payments drop from \$450 million annually to \$50 million at the end of the current fiscal year; at that time, \$450 million for transit will come from the state's General Fund. PA Turnpike CEO Mark Compton said the Scranton Beltway is one of several projects the Commission had to shelve because of funding restrictions.

"With our Act 44 payments reduced, we can begin to ramp up efforts to improve, rebuild and add capacity to our 567-mile roadway network," he said. "We are free to plan critical roadway enhancements like the Scranton Beltway to improve mobility for motorists and deliver economic opportunities to neighboring communities."

Preliminary engineering-design work on the Scranton Beltway is now underway and scheduled to continue through the first half of 2022. "Once we've completed the preliminary design phase, we plan on holding a meeting next summer to share our preliminary designs with the public," said PA Turnpike Chief Engineer Brad Heigel. "After that, final engineering-design can begin sometime in late 2022 with expected design completion in 2024. Construction could commence as soon as 2025."

PennDOT Engineering District 4 Executive Rich Roman said the Beltway is an important step to address the region's traffic issues without the significant costs and impacts of widening I-81 to six lanes. It

applies sound transportation planning principles to make use of existing infrastructure to move traffic from an overutilized roadway to an underutilized roadway.

“A lower-cost approach is essential to addressing capacity on I-81,” Roman said. “The Turnpike route is three miles shorter than the I-81 route through the region, and the speed limit on the Turnpike, is 70 mph while the I-81 speed limit is 65 mph. These advantages, along with significantly less traffic on I-476, will attract time-conscious drivers — like commercial haulers and through traffic — to divert to the faster Turnpike route.”

In addition to increasing safety and congestion on I-81, the project will benefit motorists who use local roads such as Pittston Avenue, Keyser Avenue, Cedar Avenue, South Main Street, U.S. 11, and PA 315, reducing travel times on these routes for residents.

Creating the high-speed ramps for the Scranton Beltway is feasible because of the Turnpike’s 2020 conversion to All-Electronic Tolling, allowing all customers to pay electronically while maintaining highway speed limits. Most Turnpike travelers choose E-ZPass as the preferred payment method due to the significant savings of almost 60%. For roughly 15% of non-E-ZPass travelers, tolling equipment captures license-plate images and the vehicle’s owner receives a Toll-By-Plate invoice by mail.

To learn more about the Scranton Beltway and sign up for project updates, visit <https://www.patpconstruction.com/scrantonbeltway/>.

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