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PENNDOT CONNECTS

by Leslie S. Richards

As Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, and a former Montgomery County Commissioner as well as being a Planner, I am extremely excited to announce our new initiative titled PennDOT Connects. PennDOT is committed to bettering Pennsylvania communities and our transportation system through a collaborative planning process. By working together, I believe creative transportation and land use solutions can be identified to sustain and expand mobility while improving communities throughout the Commonwealth. We want to build partnerships that invest in sustainable transportation. We are positioning ourselves as a forward thinking organization by broadening the benefits we deliver and taking a holistic approach to planning. We are tasking PennDOT staff and our Metropolitan and Rural Planning Organization (MPO/RPO) partners to consider community needs at the beginning of the planning process to ensure an appropriate allocation of our resources. PennDOT Connects will make our planning processes more efficient and cost effective to the benefit of all Pennsylvanians.

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2016 PA Chapter of APA

Award Winners

The Best and Brightest recognized at the Annual Awards Luncheon in Allentown!

The Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Planning Association (PA Chapter of APA) held its Annual Awards Luncheon in Allentown, PA where nearly 400 participates joined us. This year was unusual - our venue wasn’t the hotel ballroom; attendees celebrated the esteemed award winners of this year’s highly competitive program on the arena floor on the PPL Center.

The following awards were presented:

Daniel Burnham Award for a Comprehensive Plan
Erie Refocused: Comprehensive Plan & Community Decision-Making Guide
City of Erie
czbLLC

The City of Erie Comprehensive Plan was adopted in March 2016. The plan’s original data and pointed presentation bring clarity to the city’s recent weak market conditions and spreading disinvestment, and invoke the need to right-size and prioritize. A “trade-off exercise” helped make difficult choices about deployment of limited resources. The plan provides strategies tailored to specific sub-markets. It provides principles for decision-making, including “civic dos and don’ts,” to guide city council, departments, and local organizations in investing in and improving the city.

Planning Excellence Award – Best Practice
Zoning Ordinance of Clymer Borough
Clymer Borough
Indiana County Office of Planning & Development
Environmental Planning & Design
Indiana University of PA
Zanetta Illustrations
UpStreet Architecture

In December 2014 Clymer Borough, a rural coal town with 1,357 people, enacted its first-ever zoning ordinance. The ordinance it chose to enact, after

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An issue which occasionally occurs in PennDOT projects is the lack of early communication with the community. Without early community input, crucial elements may not be included at the outset of project scoping. Including these elements later results in project delays and higher project costs. Our goal is always to make every investment as safe and effective as it can be for every community. To further the goal of addressing community needs to the fullest extent practical, District Office staff will meet with appropriate local government staff early in project planning. **PennDOT will lead and innovate for a more livable PA.**

Collaboration meetings with Planning Partners and local governments will now become a routine element of the planning process for all new projects. This new approach to project planning will make the decision-making process for project scopes more transparent. **More transparency provides the opportunity for community input into our project scopes earlier in the process, providing PennDOT with a better understanding of local community issues in planning, thus avoiding delays later in project delivery.**

This local government outreach will involve consideration of local planning objectives and community mobility needs, including, but not limited to, bicycle and pedestrian accommodations, transit access, stormwater management, and green infrastructure. MPO/RPO’s and local governments must demonstrate the need to include community mobility and related objectives in project scopes. Ideally, decisions should be based in-part, on comprehensive planning or other related planning studies that demonstrate a need for these elements.

If no documented planning is available, project elements must be well thought-out and consistent with the current and future land uses within the community. If suggested community-related project features are justified, the community mobility needs identified during these local collaboration meetings can be incorporated into project scopes of work for consideration during project delivery. Unfortunately, in some instances not all features discussed during local government collaboration will be able to be accommodated. These features may not be reasonable due to a lack of adequate planning documentation or justification, unacceptable impacts to environmental resources, excessive right-of-way impacts, maintenance and ownership difficulties, the need to construct or relocate retaining walls or other structures, or other issues related to impacts or excessive cost. The **PennDOT Connects** process will ensure reviews of every unique enhancement to a project. PennDOT staff will strive to plan projects that improve economic competitiveness, access to work, and overall quality of life. **We strive to leverage resources to improve communities.**

The **PennDOT Connects** process will be applied to projects on the 2017 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). Collaborative meetings will also be required for all projects that had no project phase included on a prior TIP, as well as for all other TIP projects that have not started Preliminary Engineering or started Preliminary Engineering after July 1, 2016. **Looking to the future, local government collaboration meetings must occur before new projects are added to future TIPs.**

Another key component of **PennDOT Connects** is training. **Training of internal PennDOT staff is currently underway.** The next phase of training includes developing a training strategy to raise awareness and understanding of **PennDOT Connects,** its value, and the basic framework for a partnership approach going forward for local government employees. The training is also intended to manage the expectations of local governments, and encourage planning at the local level today to support opportunities for better projects in the future.

The **PennDOT Connects** policy may require additional time and financial resources in the planning and early preliminary engineering phases for project delivery. However, the benefits that community features such as sidewalks, bike lanes, and transit accessibility can provide in terms of improving economic competitiveness, access to work, and quality of life, as well as the potential to avoid delays later in project delivery, can far outweigh the additional resource requirements. **As planners, your role is essential to help communities identify and communicate their mobility needs through this new collaboration process to ensure transportation projects help move their vision for the future forward.**

I truly believe that better communities and mobility is powered through collaboration! We are looking forward to building upon existing and making new connections with our communities. ◆