

KEEPING YOU UP
TO DATE WITH ALL
OF PENNDOT'S
PROJECTS AND
INNOVATIONS
THROUGHOUT
THE YEAR



PennDOT Rises to Challenge in Major Winter Storm



New PennDOT
Plow Tracker

Multimodal Projects
Improving Communities

PennDOT's Knack for
Giving Back

PennDOT Rises to Challenge in Major Winter Storm



1 Throughout the entire winter storm “Jonas” that dropped record amounts of snowfall on the south central Pennsylvania region, PennDOT, State Police, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, and the National Guard worked tirelessly to make sure our roads and citizens were kept safe.

Constant updates provided via news conferences, social media, press releases and more ensured that the most up to date information was being communicated.

Thankfully, many Pennsylvanians heeded our warnings to not travel during this hazardous weather. But without being on the road, it can be hard to assess conditions, especially for those who don't have the option to stay home.

Through the storm, we had available our new option on www.511PA.com to see the

location of more than 700 PennDOT and contracted plow trucks across the state. These trucks cover mostly interstates and expressways, and are part of our Automated Vehicle Location (AVL) system pilot. While these 700 trucks don't represent all of PennDOT's more than 2,200 trucks statewide, making this information available is a great resource for the public.

And the numbers show that 511PA, which also offers travel alerts, traffic cameras, alerts on speed and vehicle restrictions and more, was used by hundreds of thousands of customers. The website saw 379,000 visits from Friday through Sunday – 173,000 of those came on Saturday, making it the highest number of visits since the site launched in 2009. From Friday through Monday, more than 121,000 of the visits used the “Plow Truck” option.





Governor Tom Wolf visited PennDOT employees to commend their efforts during the storm.

When at last the storm was over, the kudos for the department poured in:

"I was on the road to work rather early this morning, and was completely impressed, and very grateful, to all those PennDot employees who removed snow on Rt. 78 E&W between NJ/PA border and Lehigh St. Exit. A BIG HUGE THANK YOU!"

-Lori Wnek

"My job at Geisinger has taught me that people, as a rule, complain when there is bad service, but seldom praise when there is excellent service because everyone expects good service to be the standard. I think it's important to recognize excellence. Please keep up the good work."

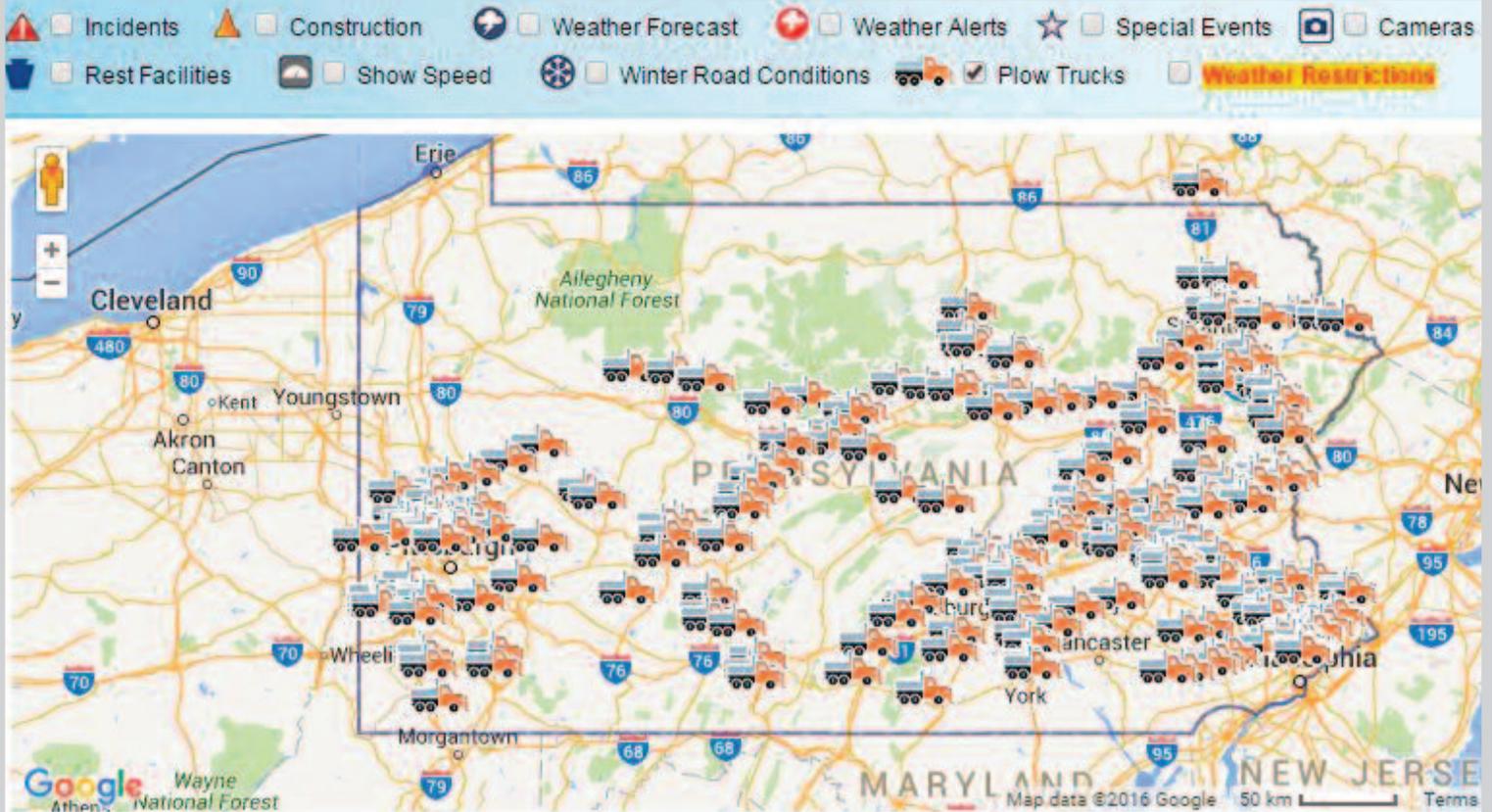
- Dr. Elizabeth Wang

"Through a weekend that relied so heavily on our services, we were glad to have another example of PennDOT's efforts to support a Government That Works for Pennsylvania drivers."

- PennDOT Secretary Leslie S. Richards



Public Can Now Track the Movement of Over 700 Snow Plows on 511PA



3 [Plow Truck Reports - Frequently Asked Questions](#)

Right now more than 700 plow trucks covering interstates and expressways statewide are outfitted with technology to improve location and operations information through PennDOT's Automated Vehicle Location (AVL) program pilot.

Now, as part of an expanded technology pilot, the public can view the location of more than 500 PennDOT plow trucks and more than 200 contracted rental trucks through the 511PA website.

While on-duty trucks will be shown in near real-time, the pilot does not show the full breadth of the department's services on interstates or expressways. Statewide back to back, PennDOT has more than 2,200 total department-force trucks and rents approximately 270 trucks and their operators to maintain the more than 40,000 miles of roadway for which PennDOT is responsible.

The AVL system pilot is part of Governor Wolf's GO-TIME initiative that leverages inter-agency coordination and collaboration to maximize efficiency, modernize state government operations, and provide the highest quality services. The pilot, as one of seven GO-TIME projects identified by PennDOT in 2016-2017, is expected to realize a cost savings of \$1.4 million over the next four to six years based on a combination of reduced salt usage and better use of department equipment.

Motorists Reminded Of Snow Removal, Windshield Wiper Laws

By Craig Yetter, Community Relations Coordinator, Driver & Vehicle Services

With more winter snowfalls likely on the way, PennDOT reminds motorists to clear snow and ice from their vehicles or face the possibility of a fine, or worse.

Under Pennsylvania law, if snow or ice is dislodged or falls from a moving vehicle and strikes another vehicle or pedestrian causing death or serious bodily injury, the operator of the source vehicle is subject to a fine of \$200 to \$1,000 for each offense.

State law also requires that headlights be turned on whenever windshield wipers are on. When driving in times of limited visibility, motorists should keep their lights on the low beams, especially during heavy snowfall.

Because weather and road conditions can worsen abruptly during the winter, motorists should always check the forecast before traveling. Road conditions for interstates and some limited-access highways are available by calling 511 from home or while stopped in a safe location, or by visiting www.511pa.com.

For winter driving tips and advice, visit www.penndot.gov/winter.

Safety, Community Health Top Priorities for Bike-Ped Coordinator



In a state with roughly 40,000 miles of state-maintained roadway and a varied blend of urban and rural population centers, ensuring that pedestrian and bicyclist needs are addressed is vital. That's also the overarching task for PennDOT's Bicycle/Pedestrian Coordinator Roy Gothie – to develop and guide policies, standards and programs to help people ride a bike, walk or take a bus more easily and safely.

“By focusing on safety and developing the multi-modal transportation network, we'll support community health even as the state's population ages, the economy shifts, and revenue for new and existing infrastructure declines,” Gothie said.

In further explaining community health as a concept, Gothie noted that it incorporates concepts from wildlife conservation, agriculture, land-use and transportation planning, among other disciplines, and “recognizes that protection of the human community as a social whole is as important as protecting the landscape.”

“I look at community health as a pivotal aspect of my responsibilities within the department, he said, “and look forward facilitating a newer, more comprehensive mission that includes safer, more connected communities where trails, bike lanes, sidewalks, transit stops, and streets knit together the social and ecological landscape.”

Send your bicycle/pedestrian concerns and comments to BikePedPA@pa.gov.

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U.S. Department of Homeland Security Issues Updated REAL ID Guidance



No immediate impact to Pennsylvania citizens is expected based on the recent announcement by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) regarding its schedule for implementing the federal REAL ID Act of 2005. The act deals with identification requirements for boarding federally regulated commercial aircraft.

According to DHS Secretary Jeh C. Johnson, starting January 22, 2018, passengers with a driver's license issued by a state that is not compliant with the REAL ID Act and has not been granted an extension will need to show an alternative form of identification to board commercial aircraft. A U.S. Passport is one of the alternative forms. However, by law passed in 2012, Pennsylvania cannot comply with the REAL ID Act.

In October of last year DHS issued Pennsylvania an extension until October 10, 2016 allowing Pennsylvania driver's licenses or identification cards to be considered documents for federal purposes, including flying on commercial airliners.

Pennsylvania has been a leader among states in its commitment to ensure the highest standards related to the security of our driver's licenses products and processes. Fundamental to our approach is a focus on continuous enhancements to the technology and techniques used.

For the most up-to-date information regarding REAL ID, please visit DHS's REAL ID Web page at www.dhs.gov/real-id-enforcement-brief.



Multimodal Transportation Projects to Enhance Communities

By Raymond Deep, Community Relations Coordinator, District 12

Two transportation projects in southwestern Pa. were made possible by the Multimodal Transportation Fund (MTF) in 2015. The MTF provides assistance to communities, municipalities, businesses, economic development organizations, public transportation agencies, and ports-rails/freight entities for multimodal transportation improvements that may otherwise not be feasible.

The projects, at the Greene County Airport to construct a new entrance hub, and at Saint Vincent College for roadway and streetscape improvements, help enhance their overall communities.

Of the multimodal funding, PennDOT Secretary Leslie S. Richards noted “This process represents an opportunity for worthwhile local projects to secure the support needed to come to fruition.”

The MTF was created by Act 89, enacted November 2013, under Pennsylvania’s far reaching transportation funding plan. Act 89 provides funding for transit, aviation, rail freight, pedestrian and bicycle modes of transportation that provide and encourage local economic development. The dedicated funding for these modes of transportation has for the first time put these modes on firmer footing for implementation and construction.

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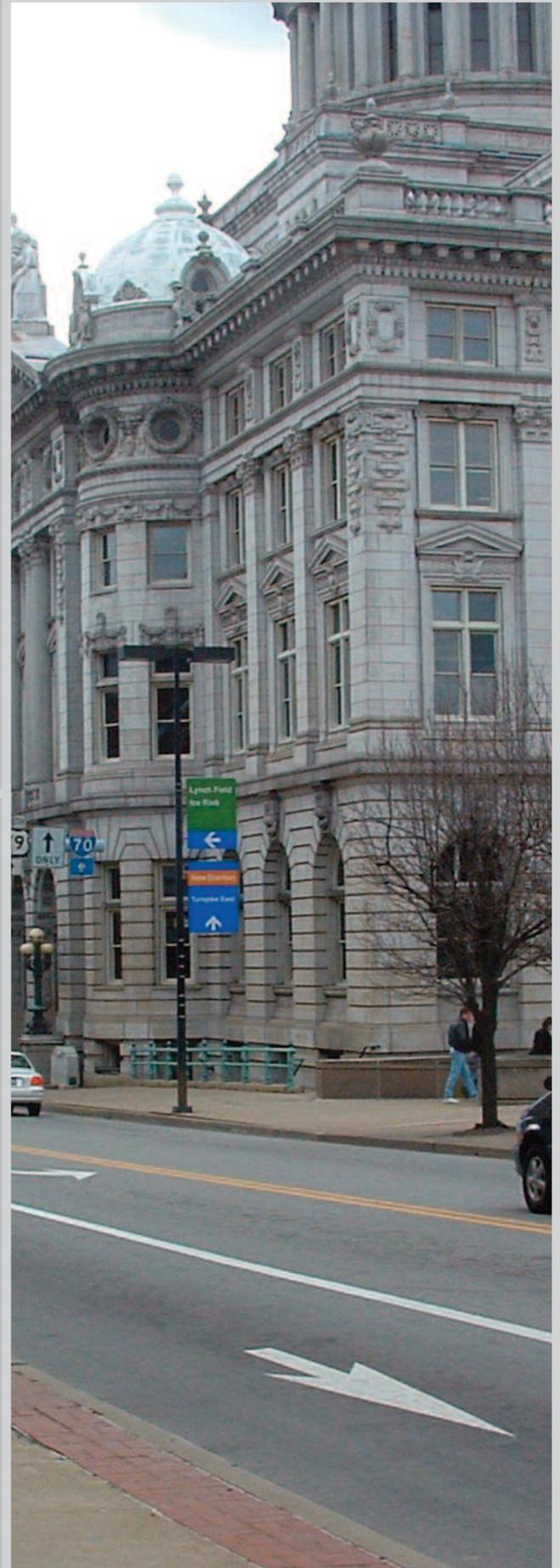
These southwestern region projects illustrate these investment goals. The Greene County Airport Entrance HUB project improvements involve constructing a new entrance hub, including pavement widening and curbing, for safety improvements and to accommodate a left-hand turning lane with additional enhancements. PennDOT provided \$1.26 million in funding toward the project with the Greene County Airport Authority providing \$156,000 in matching funds. The implementation of the improvements will positively impact the local economy and encourage and assist in economic growth and development throughout the region.

The Saint Vincent College streetscape and roadway improvements will develop and improve local transportation. Their proposal included a multi-faceted project to implement improvements that promote increased opportunities for non-vehicular and multimodal transportation on campus. This will improve safety and increase connectivity among the campus, the broader community and surrounding businesses.

The college’s facilitated connections provide a variety of transportation options for users including bus and plane service at the Arnold Palmer Regional Airport and bus and Amtrak rail service available in downtown Latrobe. Saint Vincent College attracts an estimated 250,000 visitors and tourists to the campus and the regional area for public cultural, educational, environmental and recreational programs on campus. The campus most notably hosts the Pittsburgh Steelers each summer for their annual training camp. Steelers Training Camp alone accounts for thousands of fans daily on campus, generating hundreds of thousands of dollars for the local and regional economy. The upgrades to the roadways and streetscape afford many more options for the campus employees, students, patrons and visitors to navigate the campus and connect to the downtown and surrounding areas.

Saint Vincent College was awarded a \$274,000 MTF grant to complete the project, with the college providing matching funding totaling \$118,000.

To learn more about the MTF visit www.penndot.gov and view the multimodal section under “Projects & Programs.”



Governor Wolf Announces Plans To Improve Harrisburg Transportation Center



Governor Tom Wolf and Transportation Secretary Leslie S. Richards announced plans for improvements to the Harrisburg Transportation Center and surrounding areas.

Enhancing Pennsylvania's transportation infrastructure is essential to the region's economy and the Harrisburg Transportation Center is a vital hub that serves our Keystone Corridor passenger rail service, as well as intercity bus and local transit. The center serves more than 1.6 million riders per year, including many people working for the commonwealth.

PennDOT envisions an initial investment of \$15 million in federal and state dollars to bring the Transportation Center to a state of good repair. Long range, the project envisions \$50 million to \$60 million in federal and state dollars for station and other transportation and land use improvements. These are intended to attract private sector investment to improve the areas around the station.

The Harrisburg Transportation Center, the former Pennsylvania Railroad Station, is the western terminal point for all but two of the 28 Amtrak trains that serve the station each day. In addition to the 1.6 million yearly riders, intercity and local buses also connect at the center.



State Agencies Express Interest in PennDOT's Employee Engagement Tools



Innovations Director Steve Chizmar, and fellow BOI representatives, Paul Sparano and Danielle Klinger-Grumbine, join Pennsylvania's Secretary of State Pedro Cortez and several DOS deputy secretaries and staffers for a photo following a Dec. 7 meeting to discuss PennDOT's employee engagement tools, including IdeaLink 20/20, WorkSmart and the Organizational Climate Survey.

Ask anyone and they would agree that an organization's employees are its best and most valuable resources, and key players to ensuring continuous quality improvements throughout any organization. Nobody knows how to do their jobs more efficiently, invest in taxpayer dollars more wisely or enhance workplace safety better than those who are performing the job each day.

One way PennDOT is ensuring continuous quality improvements throughout the organization is by soliciting ideas from its employees through a variety of employee engagement tools. One such tool is IdeaLink 20/20, an online system that empowers PennDOT employees to share innovative ideas they believe will improve the agency in the areas of efficiency, safety, customer service, cost savings, morale and revenue generation. Developed in-house, this bottom-up approach provides PennDOT leadership with timely input from staff at all levels on how the agency can operate more effectively and efficiently. IdeaLink 20/20 also helps to make PennDOT a better business partner and employer.

Word is quickly spreading to other state agencies about the success of IdeaLink 20/20 and other employee engagement tools PennDOT is currently utilizing, including WorkSmart, the employee online best practice sharing tool launched in December, and the Organizational Climate Survey conducted last summer. Several agencies have expressed interest in implementing similar tools in their respective organizations. As a result, PennDOT's Bureau of Innovations (BOI) recently conducted demonstrations of IdeaLink 20/20 with the departments of Aging, Community and Economic Development, Education, and State, and the Governor's Office of Administration. Additionally, the Department of State (DOS) engaged BOI in dialogue regarding its Organizational Climate Survey, and BOI provided guidance on conducting such a survey and offered assistance in launching a similar survey at DOS.

Employee engagement tools, including IdeaLink 20/20, were also a featured topic at a December 2015 Governor's Office of Transformation, Innovation, Management and Efficiency (GO-TIME) Transformation Leaders' Showcase event. Representatives from PennDOT's BOI spoke at great length about the implementation of IdeaLink 20/20 and its overall success. Subsequently, two additional agencies – the departments of Conservation and Natural Resources and Corrections – requested demonstrations of the system for their respective agencies. The interest PennDOT's IdeaLink 20/20 and other employee engagement tools has generated among other agencies further validates the need for and importance of these tools in any organization to ensure continuous quality improvements.

Department Partners for Cleaner, More Efficient Water Transportation

By Steve Cowan, Community Relations Coordinator, District 11



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There is no questioning Peter Stephaich's passion for the Marine Vessel Winnie C. As president of Campbell Transportation Company, Inc., Stephaich and Mary Ann Bucci of the Port of Pittsburgh Commission provided a first-hand look at the tugboat that is undergoing major upgrades in the dry dock along the Monongahela River. As workers removed sections of the hull, Stephaich explained that the Winnie C may have been scrapped without assistance of the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ). This tugboat, along with several others in his fleet, not only have been saved from demolition but will undergo extensive improvements to their engines, propellers, generators and living quarters.

PennDOT District 11 (covering Allegheny, Beaver and Lawrence counties), in conjunction with the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, is overseeing over \$11 million in federal CMAQ funding for marine diesel engine retrofitting under the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21). The CMAQ program came into existence through the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) and focuses on improving air quality and reducing congestion. It has provided over \$30 billion in assistance to over 29,000 nationwide

projects in subsequent transportation acts since its inception. MAP-21 provided \$2.2 billion in CMAQ funding in 2013-2014.

Southwestern Pennsylvania has invested CMAQ funding in a variety of ways to benefit the public. Transit projects like the purchase of new vehicles and modification of conventionally fueled busses, to traffic mitigation projects like interchange/intersection upgrades and traffic signal enhancements to improve traffic flow, have been common for many years. Additionally, bicycle and pedestrian facilities and programs, van and carpooling programs and idle reduction are other types of funding projects.

The importance of river travel to the region's economy is unquestioned. Pittsburgh was the 17th busiest port in the United States in 2012 according to the Army Corps of Engineers. Over 30 million tons of freight are hauled on our rivers annually. Commodities such as coal, chemicals and petroleum products are transported by way of barge. The typical 15 barge tow is equal to 216 rail cars and six locomotives or 1,050 tractor trailers.

Through the current CMAQ funding, nine boats have been completed with diesel engine retrofitting and other various

upgrades handled by the PennDOT contract. As the CMAQ funding requires a 50 percent cash match, companies are making substantial investments to their fleets, which in turn boosts the economy and lowers pollution. For example, the Campbell Transportation Company has contributed nearly \$2.5 million to improve four boats and will invest an additional \$1.4 million on four more. Prior to the retrofit, Campbell's vessel Louise S would burn approximately 1,928 gallons of fuel per day. Since the completion of the work, the Louise S requires approximately 1,456 gallons per day. A 12-day trip from Pittsburgh to Cairo, Illinois, represents approximately a savings of 5,600 gallons. With over 30 trips a year, not only is that a substantial decrease in pollution, but also a \$300,000 savings in fuel costs alone.

Utilizing the CMAQ funding has substantially cut emissions by replacing old ineffective engines with new cleaner diesel engines. For the completed Campbell fleet alone, the lifetime consumption of nitrogen oxides and hydrocarbons will be nearly cut in half. Additionally, with over 600 barges in service, tens of thousands of truck trips are avoided on our highways.

Meet Deputy Secretary of Multimodal Transportation Toby Fauver



What does being the Deputy Secretary of Multimodal Transportation entail?

"I view my position as providing leadership to the multimodal partners of Pennsylvania, which include public transportation, rail freight, ports, waterways, bike ped, and aviation. My office is responsible for the distribution of funding to the modes, and to ensure it's being used effectively, efficiently, and in compliance with the law. I also view my position as being a mentor and leader to the PennDOT Multimodal staff. I strive to motivate and challenge individuals, and assist in career development."

What was your top highlight of 2015 and why?

"My deputation accomplishments and highlights are a reflection not of me, but a reflection of the team of great people in multimodal who work to make those accomplishments happen. So my top highlight of 2015 is not a specific item recorded in the Accomplishment Report, but having a team of people who enjoy their jobs and work hard to make a difference." See the 2015 Multimodal Highlights Report at www.PennDOT.gov on the "Multimodal Program" page under "Projects & Programs."

What are your priorities for 2016?

- "My goals for 2016 are listed here, in no specific order:
- Complete the [internal] Multimodal reorganization
 - Select a CNG P3 project vendor and construct first tier CNG stations. Learn more at www.P3forPA.pa.gov.
 - Continue to advance public transportation consolidation
 - Select and implement Shared Ride pilot proposals
 - Construct the Mt. Joy Train Station
 - Complete strategic plans with all three ports
 - Work with the aviation caucus to attract and create aviation-related jobs in Pennsylvania

What is your favorite meal and why?

"Venison tenderloin wrapped in bacon, roasted potatoes, Brussel sprouts and coconut cream pie. Why? Because it tastes good!"

Bedford Heritage Trail Another Step in Connecting Communities

By Tara Callahan-Henry, Community Relations Coordinator District 9



The long-in-development Bedford Heritage Trail project saw a milestone achieved this past construction season. After several years of fundraising by the Bedford Joint Municipal Authority within the community and help from PennDOT and the Department of Community, a 1.15 mile portion of the project was completed.

Local businesses and property owners also played a crucial role in helping this part of the project come to fruition by donating right of way easements. The Bedford Elks Organization, the Omni Bedford Springs Resort, and a private residency all donated right of way so that this portion of the trail could connect the Borough of Bedford with the Bedford Springs Resort.

The section that was completed this season stretches from the southern border of the Borough of Bedford approximately 1.15 miles south adjacent to the Bedford Springs Resort. The project also included two pedestrian structures that span Shobers Run in Bedford Borough and Bedford Township. The two structures are single-span prefabricated truss bridges on reinforced concrete abutments. The new portion of the trail ties in to the existing trail loop in the area.

The ribbon cutting for the newly opened portion of the Bedford Heritage Trail took place on Friday, September 25, 2015. The new opening was also celebrated with a Bedford Trail "Fun Run, Wellness Walk, and Bike Event," that was held the following day, September 26. The Bedford Joint Municipal Authority is looking forward to continuing the development of the trail and connecting it to more tourist attractions in the future.

The Bedford Heritage Trail master plan seeks to connect the trail to various other attractions in the Bedford area such as the H&BT Rail Trail, an extension from the Omni Bedford Springs Resort to the C&O canal in Cumberland, MD, and finally to the Great Allegheny Passage. The overall goal of the project is to stimulate economic growth in downtown Bedford, increase recreational opportunities for the residents of Bedford County, provide educational opportunities for the students of the Bedford Area School District, and to provide sustainable forms of travel in the downtown Bedford area.

The trail can be enjoyed by the local community and anyone else who comes to visit the area thanks to the hard work and perseverance of all involved parties. Thanks to the efforts of everyone involved, the trail can be enjoyed by people for generations to come and will allow visitors to enjoy the beautiful scenery that the area has to offer. This project is just another example of how the department works with local leaders across the state in order to promote projects that not only get people "from A to B," but also improve the quality of life for the people in a particular region.

PennDOT's Knack For Giving Back!



Secretary Richards and Executive Assistant Denise Barns cook pancakes and serve them to staff to benefit the State Employees Combined Appeal.

Not only are we part of the community, we give back to our community.

Regardless of position, PennDOT staff look for ways to give back to their communities beyond their day-to-day duties, and the variety of efforts mounted on behalf of the State Employees Combined Appeal (SECA) are testimony to that fact. This year, PennDOT employees engaged in a range of activities to boost giving to SECA and pledges totaled nearly \$448,000! More than one in three PennDOT employees contributed to the overall commonwealth campaign goal of \$3 million which will benefit more than 1,000 approved charitable organizations and countless individuals.

More than 4,000 caring and dedicated PennDOT employees came together to pledge \$447,574.51, surpassing the Governor's Office of Administration's targeted goal for our department of \$446,136.51. We also exceeded the targeted participation total of 4,086 employees.

Even more impressive than beating the targeted goals, that \$447,574.51 represents the highest monetary total PennDOT has achieved since 2009!

Last year the department raised 14 percent of the commonwealth's overall \$3.1 million, noteworthy for a department that makes up 11 percent of the commonwealth's workforce. As always, we have shown the commonwealth and the public that when we all come together as one team there is no limit to what we can accomplish!

The SECA campaign wrapped-up just before the holiday season began, and for PennDOT staff, it served as the perfect jumping off point for the next wave of charitable giving.

Activities to benefit local residents and charities took place all across the state. We thought you'd enjoy taking a look at some of these PennDOT Family Snapshots:



Volunteers with the Lycoming County Toys for Tots and organizers of PennDOT District 3's Bill Craver Memorial Bikes for Tykes project gather with some of the approximately 50 bicycles bought and assembled by Montoursville-based district employees this season.



Mrs. Santa was Loni Shalkowski and Santa was Christopher Rood, employees in PennDOT's Dunmore-based region. Children are from the West Scranton Head Start Center, Scranton.



The six-county, Hollidaysburg-based district again participated in the Holiday Wish Program through the Department of Public Welfare.

PennDOT Celebrates “Season of Giving” Statewide



Santa waves as he stands among the gifts donated by employees of District 1, covering Crawford, Erie, forest, Mercer, Venango and Warren counties.

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District 12, covering Fayette, Greene, Washington and Westmoreland counties, participated in a Thanksgiving Food Drive and Christmas Angel Tree Project.

The Holiday Wish Program



PennDOT “wrapped-up” the season of giving by hosting the annual Holiday Wish Program;” this year, including a visit by Governor Tom Wolf. Through the program, families and seniors are carefully selected and wish lists created. The gifts are dropped off in a central location for distribution. This year the event was hosted by PennDOT at the Keystone Building’s atrium in Harrisburg.

PennDOT Bureau Director Performs for President, First Lady



The Hershey Handbell Ensemble and the Obamas. Back row, on the far left is PennDOT's Laine Heltebride

11 This holiday season was particularly memorable for PennDOT Planning and Research Bureau Director Laine Heltebride. As a member of the Hershey Handbell Ensemble since 2004, Heltebride is used to spending many hours rehearsing and performing at various holiday venues throughout Central Pennsylvania. What happened this past holiday season however, is one for the books.

It was during an otherwise uneventful rehearsal that the managing director of the group approached Heltebride to show him an email he had received. Out of the blue the ensemble was invited to perform at the White House for a Holiday reception! The email stated "We like to use regional groups, if you're interested and would consider doing it for no compensation, please send us some dates when you'd be available and we'd be happy to consider you."

When asked how the White House found out about the ensemble, Heltebride commented "They found us on the internet!"

The group swiftly committed to perform in Washington on December 15, and a whole new holiday experience was underway. Due to White House security requirements, the group went through background checks and had to limit the pieces of equipment they would bring – and they were sworn to secrecy about the performance.

When the performance day came, after going through security and having each of their 53 handbells inspected, the group was in for more surprises. A staffer alerted the ensemble that not only would they be meeting the president and first lady and having their picture taken with them, but they also had to prepare a special 45-second piece to perform!

Prepared for performing two one-hour sets as requested by the White House, the director decided to pack some additional music which happened to include "We Wish You a Merry Christmas." Our director told us, "You ring it, I'll time it," according to Heltebride. "We played it and it lasted exactly 45 seconds!"

The group was then led via staffers to the "China Room" of the White House, where the place settings for all of the first families are. The group set-up in the circular room and played for the staff. From there they went to the diplomatic reception room where they set up for a picture with the Obamas.

When the president and first lady arrived, they started their conversation by saying "We love Hershey!" and both the president and the first lady shook the hands of everyone in the group.

Heltebride relates that the couple peppered the ensemble with questions, such as when they started, how they learned to ring and where they were all from. The president also asked why ringers had to wear gloves, and

the director explained that at the time of their creation, handbells had leather handles, so the oils in their hands would start wearing out the leather. Gloves are used today avoid having to polish the castings after every practice.

After the president's curiosity about the group was satisfied, the ensemble performed their 45-second version of "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" for the couple.

"After thanking us for our performance," Heltebride said, "Mrs. Obama told us that both of their daughters rang handbells in school, adding, 'You guys are nothing like having to sit through those middle school concerts!'"

After performing the second of their two-hour set, Heltebride thanked the staffer again for the opportunity. Heltebride also learned from the staffer that the president rarely asks that many questions!

"I can't put into words the further impact of meeting a sitting president of the United States and his wife. It was a time and place where my love of handbells and my love of history met." He added, "Our group is like a second family. To have shared this opportunity with them made it all the more special."

Anyone interested in knowing more about the Hershey Handbell Ensemble should visit www.hersheyhandbellensemble.org.