NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

NJDOT Commissioner James S. Simpson Remarks
Pulaski Skyway Press Conference
April 10, 2014
Jersey City, New Jersey

On behalf of Gov. Christie, welcome. The turnout for this press conference reflects the importance of this project and the magnitude of traffic impacts that the Department, its sister transportation agencies, and local municipalities have planned so hard to minimize.

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge elected and other officials. All of us look forward to the Skyway's timely completion, especially the contracts involving the replacement of the Skyway bridge deck, requiring the two-year northbound closure.

Almost 82 years ago, the engineering marvel that looms in the distance behind us was opened to traffic, creating a new transportation link for motor vehicles between New York City and New Jersey and points west.

It was known by several names, including the first superhighway, the Meadowlands Viaduct, the Diagonal Highway, and the High Level Viaduct before it was named the Pulaski Skyway. It stretched for 3.5 miles between Newark and Jersey City, high above the Meadowlands in Kearny and over the Passaic and Hackensack rivers. It fed motor vehicles to the mouth of what was then the five-year-old Holland Tunnel.

The 1920s and 30s constituted a great era for building the infrastructure that was needed to accommodate the ascendant mode of transportation—cars, buses and trucks. The Holland Tunnel opened in 1927, the George Washington Bridge opened in 1931, the Pulaski Skyway in 1932, and the Lincoln Tunnel would open in 1937.

Project purpose

Eight-plus decades have not diminished the importance of the Pulaski Skyway one bit. It carries 74,000 vehicles per day, including 40,000 in the northbound direction toward Jersey City, Hudson County and New York destinations.

What has diminished is its structural integrity. Eighty-two years of pounding traffic, road salt and sub-optimal drainage systems have taken a huge toll on all components of the bridge, and that's why we're here today.

We launched an eight-year, $1 billion-plus rehabilitation program in 2012 and now have reached the point where we are ready to tear off 14 lane-miles of the original bridge deck – more than a million square feet – and install brand new, 21st-century deck consisting of high-strength prefabricated concrete panels, with new steel floorbeams and stringers where needed to support the deck.

The original deck is 16 inches thick in some areas. The new deck will be eight inches thick, lightening the dead load of the bridge by 27 percent.

Work will continue to repair or replace components of the superstructure and the substructure into the year 2020, but it is the next two years that are the most important and which will have the most impact on traffic.

Some press here today joined me on Monday for an up-close look at the bridge. We positioned one of our lift trucks under the Skyway near Tonnelle Circle and lifted journalists within arm's reach of the floorbeams, for them to see the extent of the deterioration to the steel that supports the deck.

Pictures truly are worth a thousand words, and I think the news crews who were there, along with their viewers and readers, have a an understanding of why we need to do this project now, and why we need to do it in a manner that gets the job done as safely and quickly as possible. Simply put, we do not have the luxury of time.

If we don't do this now, we might wake up and find ourselves facing an emergency closure of the entire bridge. In fact, we have had some emergency closures in the last couple of years.

In report-card terms, the bridge is a D- and about to become an F.

Engineers have their own way of describing the bridge, using terms like “condition” and “sufficiency rating.”

The Skyway’s superstructure (all the steel you see) is in poor condition. The deck, or roadway, is in poor condition. The substructure (everything below the deck) is rated fair.

The Skyway has been deemed structurally deficient since 1983.

I know firsthand the effects of delaying maintenance and repair efforts. Sadly, when I was at US DOT under President Bush, I was the first official to learn of the I-35 Bridge collapse in Minnesota and reached out to the Federal Highway Administrator and the Secretary of Transportation.

We are ensuring that such a disaster does not occur in New Jersey. In the past 20 years, more than 600 bridges have failed in the U.S. We don’t want Pulaski to be one of them.

When we finish the rehabilitation project, the Skyway will be taken off our structurally deficient list and will be ready for another 75 years of safe use.

The Skyway is functionally obsolete and will remain so after the rehabilitation project. Functional obsolescence refers to highway or bridge features that do not meet modern standards.
Many iconic structures are functionally obsolete, including the Brooklyn Bridge, the George Washington Bridge, and the Williamsburg Bridge.

Chief among the Skyway’s features that have led to its functionally obsolete designation is a lack of shoulders. Shoulders provide space for emergency vehicles to cut through traffic, or space for disabled vehicles to get out of the way and allow other traffic to flow.

Due to the design of the Skyway, we cannot widen it, and it will remain a bridge that offers just two travel lanes in each direction with no shoulders. However, where we can make functional improvements, we will.

For instance, at the Broadway ramp where motorists merge onto the Skyway southbound lanes, the geometry will be improved to provide more acceleration distance and better sight lines for safe merging.

The project also includes new lighting along the entire length of the structure, and new railings will meet modern standards.

The decision to close northbound lanes

Before I speak to you about our traffic mitigation plans, I'd like to spend a moment on why we decided that closing the northbound travel lanes was the best way to replace the deck.

Based upon rigorous engineering analyses, our structural, traffic, and safety engineers have called for this action, due to their serious safety concerns. Safety must always trump convenience. Our decision to undertake this project is crucial to the safety of the motoring public.

We looked at multiple construction options, including:

- Contra-flow, reversing traffic every day to flow northbound in the morning peak period and southbound in the evening peak
- maintaining one travel lane in each direction
- limiting work to nights and weekends.

These methods would have stretched the construction schedule to at least six years and would have created greater safety and traffic problems in and around the region, and not just in the a.m. peak.

A six-year timeline to replace the deck is a non-starter. The deck and structure supports will not last that long.

Furthermore, there are other major bridge projects in this region that need to be started after the Skyway lanes are reopened and, like the Pulaski Skyway, we cannot wait six years for those projects to advance. (I-495 over 1&9 and a new stage of the Route 7 Wittpenn Bridge project)

The reverse flow, or contra-flow method would require complete, shutdowns of the Skyway twice a day to all traffic in both directions, creating more safety and traffic problems.

Maintaining one travel lane in each direction creates the extremely undesirable and unsafe condition of 3.5-mile-long cattle chutes for cars on very narrow lanes separated by a concrete barrier. A breakdown or accident would create epic traffic jams and risk the safety of those in need of first aid.

The weekend and nights option was intriguing because it held out the promise of full travel capacity during the weekdays when thousands of motorists use the Skyway to get to and from work.

However, it also contained serious risks of repeated, unanticipated lane closures if crews could not complete a section they were working on by Monday morning. That method also compromised the quality of the work because work would have to be done in small sections, with the threat of an uneven driving surface. There also would be an eight-inch differential between the thicker old deck and the thinner new deck.

We asked our design consultant, Parsons Brinckerhoff, to review the various construction methods with a critical eye and subject our choice to peer review. Some of the best engineers in the world concurred that our approach is the best one.

In less than a year from now, the southbound traffic that will continue to flow over the Skyway will be shifted to the new northbound lanes, and construction crews will switch to the southbound side to start the process of replacing the deck on that side of the structure.

They will work around the clock, seven days a week to finish the job – both sides of the Skyway – in two years.

Getting traffic onto a brand new, sturdy deck in less than a year is a big deal. I don't mean to alarm anyone who uses the Skyway: we would close it if it were unsafe, but I will be breathing easier when southbound traffic is shifted to the new deck next year.

We will be monitoring the bridge during construction with monitors similar to an EKG to detect any twisting or uneven stresses, and have instructed the contractor not to store construction materials on the deck to avoid uneven loading. We have conducted analyses on asymmetrical loading as well.

So, with the decision made to close one side of the bridge at a time, and to limit traffic to just one direction, the question was, "which direction should traffic flow?" The answer was obvious.

Prohibiting southbound traffic would create greater traffic congestion in Jersey City and also posed the risk of chronic traffic jams inside the Holland Tunnel and in lower Manhattan.

There are far more alternate routes and public transportation options for motorists heading toward Jersey City than from the Holland Tunnel and Jersey City. Maintaining southbound travel also preserves predictable travel time to Newark Airport, a key regional economic asset.

However, let's be clear. The existing traffic volumes on alternate routes already are high. We recognize there is going to be tremendous amount of pain involved, particularly for those who live and work in the Hoboken, Jersey City and Manhattan area. This bridge is part of an already clogged network at peak travel times, and we understand that everyone in this corridor will be affected.

Our best option presents serious challenges, and severe economic and quality-of-life costs. These facts brings me to the final section of my remarks.

Traffic mitigation: alternate routes and modes

The economic and quality-of-life costs of doing this project will be huge over the next two years, but the pain pales in comparison to a situation in which we were suddenly forced to completely shut down the bridge.

40,000 cars travel on the Skyway northbound lanes each day, including 9,600 in the morning peak period of 6-9 a.m.

- 76% of northbound motorists are traveling to Jersey City or other Hudson County destinations.
    - (35% to JC and 41% to other Hudson County destinations)
    - 24% are heading to the Holland Tunnel

We conducted a survey of Skyway users to help understand where they were coming from and where they were headed, and have studied traffic volumes and capacity on all the alternate routes.

The department has worked closely with other transportation agencies, and with the affected municipalities, particularly Jersey City, to develop plans to accommodate the displaced motorists.

If motorists see your broadcasts and read your stories, and take steps to learn about the options

available to them, then this press conference will have fulfilled one of its main purposes.

Motorists need to select an alternate route or a mass transit option – we will carefully monitor mass transit for crowding and parking – and then select another option as a backup plan. They need to be ready to adapt in the first days and weeks.

I'm going to briefly describe the options that are available, and will first speak about the public transportation options. Thousands of extra seats have been added to rail, bus and ferry services, and we really need motorists to switch to these modes or travel off-peak.

As I mentioned earlier, we need to divert 9,600 cars that take the Skyway northbound each morning peak period. The public transportation and alternate route options that we have created or enhanced should accommodate or remove from the roadways about 13,600 vehicles.

Mass transportation

NJ TRANSIT has increased morning and evening peak period capacity on Morris and Essex Lines trains, Raritan Valley Line trains and North Jersey Coast Line trains.

Trains to Hoboken Terminal provide customers with good connections to NYC via PATH or ferry and to Jersey City via NJ TRANSIT's Hudson-Bergen Light Rail Line.

The Port Authority has increased the frequency of PATH trains departing Newark Penn Station, increasing capacity by approximately 6,000 seats each morning. These trains offer a great way to get to Midtown and Lower Manhattan destinations, as well as to Jersey City and Hoboken.

NJ TRANSIT also has launched an express bus service along the Route 22 corridor to Newark Penn Station. All of the
NJ TRANSIT rail and bus enhancements add up to nearly 3,000 new seats.

NJDOT has arranged for new park-and-ride bus service to be provided by Suburban Transit, a private carrier, from a lot located off of Route 1&9 South near Newark International Airport with service to Jersey City. Free parking is available for 650 cars, and the bus fare, being subsidized by NJDOT, is only $2.

This is a great option for motorists, with service starting from 6 to 9 a.m., and return service to the lot starting at 12:30 p.m. and continuing until 10 p.m.

New Seastreak ferry service from Atlantic Highlands to Jersey City and Hoboken is in place to give 300 coastal commuters a new option that frees them from congested roadways. Fares are $12 each way.

Alternate roadways

Those who need to continue driving to work should adjust their drive times to avoid the morning peak if at all possible.

A primary alternate route will be the Turnpike Extension between exits 14 and 14C, where the shoulder has been reinforced to accommodate a third lane of traffic during morning and evening peak periods (6-10 a.m. and 3-7 p.m.)

Motorists should look for overhead signs indicating when the lane is open, closed, or about to close. This lane should accommodate about an extra 5,700 vehicles during each peak period.

Drivers who do choose to use the Turnpike can save time at the toll plazas by opening an E-ZPass account.

Route 1&9 T has been improved with wider entrance ramps in Newark and adaptive traffic signal improvements to handle as many as 1,700 additional vehicles during the morning peak.

The New Jersey Turnpike Eastern Spur to Lincoln Tunnel is expected to accommodate an additional 1,900 cars during the morning peak.

Private bus carriers that operate 105 buses on the Skyway northbound lanes have agreed to try an alternate route for those buses going to Manhattan. They will use the Goethals Bridge, Staten Island Expressway, Verrazano Narrows Bridge, Gowanus Expressway and Brooklyn Battery Tunnel to NYC.

Dozens of Variable Message signs will display trip times to help motorists alter their route and select the least-congested roadway to their destination each day. We will be tracking traffic volumes on the

main roadways to understand which routes are being chosen by motorists.

The Department's project team and I have been working closely with Newark, Kearny, and Jersey city law enforcement, and especially with Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop and his staff to try to mitigate anticipated impacts on local streets.

NJDOT is funding the positioning of Kearny police officers at the top of the Skyway ramps to help speed responses to incidents in the southbound travel lanes.

Jersey City has worked with us as a true partner, and stepped up with detailed plans to try to keep traffic flowing along major corridors. The Department contributed to this plan by agreeing to fund about 55 police officers who will be stationed at key intersections to help keep traffic moving.

We're also funding police in Newark to help keep traffic moving on local streets near the western end of the Skyway.

We have kept other communities, as well as Union, Hudson and Essex county officials, informed along the way. The Department is committed to keeping the productive lines of communication open with all of our partners as the work gets under way.

We understand that no plan is perfect and that we will need to make adjustments depending on the travel routes and modes patterns that emerge as the most popular and least popular.

We recognize that next week, with Passover, Easter and schools closed, traffic will be lighter. So the second week will be tougher than the first.

In closing, I think everybody with a stake in this project, from motorists to local elected officials, should be aware that this is going to be difficult and there will be a period of adjustment as motorists try different ways to get to work.

We need motorists to be our partners and take advantage of all the options that are available, because no one option will come close to accommodating everyone.

The posters we have brought with us today show alternate routes and modes in some detail. This information also is available on the Department's website at www.pulaskiskyway.com.

The social media savvy can follow us on Twitter @skywayrehab, and there is up-to-the-minute traffic information at www.511nj.org

Thank you. Please join me in welcoming Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop.

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