

Helping Motorists Get from Here to There

By James P. Fox

On any given day, there are roughly 100 Department of Transportation construction projects—a billion dollars in contracts—on our streets and highways as we work on reducing congestion, improving safety, mobility and the quality of life for New Jerseyans.

Since January, the DOT has awarded 71 contracts worth \$325 million and we will award another \$235 million in work by the end of the year, an increase of 42% from last year.

We are fast-tracking \$300 million in engineering and right-of-way work to move critical projects that will put more work out on the streets and ultimately help New Jerseyans get where they need to go as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Our capital budget alone is \$2.5 billion, but even with this massive investment, New Jersey will face a \$2.5 billion deficit to fix bridges throughout the state over the next five years. Our mass transit system, its vulnerabilities and deficiencies highlighted by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in Manhattan, requires hundreds of millions of dollars

in new equipment. Highways remain clogged, yet our population grows and more than 8 million people look to us to help them get to work, to school and, at the end of the day, back home.

We are learning to do more with less and to find new ways to fix a transportation network riddled with aging bridges, dangerous intersections and congested highways and plagued by deferred maintenance.

A project that epitomizes our new approach is the rehabilitation of the Driscoll Bridge. Talk about fixing the bridge, which sees more than a quarter-of-a-million cars daily, has been plentiful, but a realistic plan remained elusive. By using monies from both the Garden State Parkway, which owns the bridge, and the Turnpike, we have now awarded the first construction contracts.

Innovation and planning will be key as we move ahead with a number of other initiatives. Reducing congestion is our highest priority. A recent study found that 261 million hours are lost annually by drivers in New Jersey, an average of 45 hours per driver. The cost to our economy is more startling: \$7.3 billion annually with \$4.7 billion

FIVE CONGESTED ROADWAYS

- A 6-mile segment of Route 1 in Lawrence and West Windsor
- An 11-mile segment of Route 1 and 1 & 9 in Edison, Woodbridge and Rahway
- A 10.8-mile stretch of Route 3 in Hudson, Bergen and Passaic counties
- A 10.9-mile stretch of Route 4 in Englewood Park, Fair Lawn, Paramus, River Edge, Hackensack, Teaneck, and Fort Lee
- A 7-mile section of Route 9 in Lakewood and Dover

Source: New Jersey Department of Transportation

in lost time and \$400 million in wasted fuel. And driving on neglected roads costs New Jersey's drivers \$889 million annually in extra vehicle repairs, an average of \$160 per motorist.

We are funneling our capital dollars into projects that ease congestion and have reduced expenditures for new roads from 20% of our capital budget to just 4%. Instead of building new roads out into our rural areas, our efforts remain focused on addressing existing bottlenecks.

At NJ Transit, we've adopted a back-to-basics approach to address capacity and customer service issues. By using our equipment and our money more carefully, we've provided seats for

the 4,000 people who have been forced to stand on our trains. For the first time in six years, we have increased weekend rail service into New York City.

We cannot succeed without coordination between local, state and federal officials. With the upcoming reauthorization next year of the TEA-21 federal transportation fund in Washington, D.C., we must present a unified front, as a state and a region, to make sure New Jersey gets its fair share of federal transportation monies. Our future depends upon it. ■

James P. Fox is commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Transportation.