

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



M o b i l i z i n g t h e R e g i o n

Testimony of Damien Newton, Tri-State Transportation Campaign, on the Draft Highlands Regional Master Plan January, 2007

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am the New Jersey coordinator for the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, and a resident of East Rutherford. The Campaign is the region's leading non-profit consortium of experts, planning organizations, activist and environmental groups concerned with transportation. Our mission is to achieve an environmentally sound, economically efficient and socially just transportation network in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

The Campaign has been an active member in the development of this plan, serving on the Council's Transportation Technical Advisory Committee, testifying at Council hearings and even testifying on exemption applications. We remain committed to seeing a transportation system for the Highlands that meets the goals we set for the rest of the region.

At first glance, this document seems to be one the Campaign whole heartedly endorses; much of the language reads like it is from one of our brochures. The plan seeks to minimize the creation of impervious surfaces, requires towns and municipalities to create circulation plans emphasizing smart growth and a pedestrian element, while recognizing the crippling effect local trips can have on regional congestion.

However, this plan's language is vague in some areas, creating loopholes that you can, perhaps literally, drive a truck through. For example, in the section that "requires that impervious surfaces be minimized" the plan doesn't have a hard cap on the amount of impervious surface to be capped, or any guidelines the Council can use to reject applications which have too much surface. Without such a guideline, the enforcement of this requirement will be subjective, varying from permit to permit, and could result in lawsuits.

Throughout the Draft Master Plan, the document requires that different developments and circulation plans follow the Highlands Site Plan and Design Standard, but that standard does not currently exist. It is impossible to comment on the circulation element of the plan without addressing what the Site Plan and Design Standard actually do so we can

better understand what the transportation-related requirements for new development actually are.

A last concern is that the plan contains language that implies support for the Lackawanna Cutoff rail line (although it doesn't mention the project by name). Recently, the project received a favorable review in an Environmental Analysis from NJ Transit. However, the cost of the project is now estimated at over half a billion dollars. NJ Transit officials, at the first and only meeting of the Council's Transportation Technical Advisory Committee, estimate that the project will take 2% of the traffic off of Route 78.

That's right, for the low cost of half a billion dollars, one out of every 50 cars that currently exist on Route 78 will go away. An unmentioned cost is what effect the rail line's reactivation would have on development patterns. New rail projects into undeveloped areas can accelerate development around each of its new stations. The Lackawanna Cutoff reactivation project should receive a full review from the Highlands Commission, including a full analysis of its development impacts, before it proceeds into the design phase.

The Highlands also needs a comprehensive rail freight plan. *The Trucks Are Coming*, a 2005 report by the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, shows that truck traffic in the region will increase by 80% between 1998 and 2020. One way to battle the rising tide of truck traffic is to increase rail freight. Unlike passenger freight, reactivating freight rail lines has negligible impacts on development and will remove hundreds of trucks from our highways. Yet, plans to reactivate freight rail lines in the Highlands have not received the public support that the Lackawanna Cutoff plan has from the Council.

Overall, the transportation element of the Highlands Regional Master Plan shows promise; however, there is still work to be done. To best protect the region's resources, vague language must be put aside for specific goals, restrictions and requirements to explicitly spell out what is expected of new transportation projects in the region and what transportation-related requirements will be imposed on new development.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify, and will be available to answers questions.