

Transit tops commissioner's list

CHAIRWOMAN TELLS TRANSPORTATION ASSOCIATION SLIP RAMP, PAOLI CENTER CONCERNS CAN'T BE IGNORED

By GRETCHEN METZ, Staff Writer

EAST WHITELAND — Carol Aichele wants a Paoli Transportation Center up and running before she dies, and she wants a slip ramp from the Pennsylvania Turnpike to Great Valley completed by then, too.

The Chester County Commissioners' chairwoman, in a presentation to members of the Transportation Management Association of Chester County, was clear: "We need to address these concerns. We can't be put off again."

Aichele was joined by commissioners Kathi Cozzone and Terence Farrell at the association's annual Chester County Board of Commissioners Breakfast held Wednesday at the Desmond Hotel & Conference Center in the Great Valley Corporate Center.

The Paoli community has been waiting for a transit center for 16 years. If it goes as planned, it would be built at the remediated Paoli Rail Yard and include the new station, a parking garage, a bus station and office space, along with other amenities.

The EZpass-only slip ramp would let turnpike drivers off at Route 29 near corporate centers. It is waiting for Department of Environmental Protection permits. Great Valley-bound turnpike motorists presently get off the turnpike at Valley Forge and drive Route 202 to get to Route 29.

Transportation issues top Aichele's list of issues to resolve, which includes the widening of Route 202's section 300 from North Valley Road in Tredyffrin to where the Exton Bypass ends in East Whiteland.

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation has a \$5 billion annual budget with a \$1.7 billion annual deficit, Aichele told the gathering.

Highway projects can no longer be funded with "smoke and mirrors," Aichele said. "The issue is, how to fund projects with limited resources."

Aichele called on the transportation association to bring together a group of executives to address transportation concerns in Chester County, a group she would join.

"We'll go to Harrisburg. We'll go to wherever we need to go," Aichele said. The

Great Valley area is the state's "economic engine. There are 70,000 jobs within a two-mile radius of section 300."

Widening section 300 was on the commonwealth's Transportation Improvement Program, now it is not, Aichele said, calling PennDOT's highway funding program a "shell game."

Farrell, who has a background in real estate, discussed the Chester County Justice Center that is expected to be completed this year.

"It's been a long saga, it is much needed," Farrell said, explaining that county government has had to expand services as the county has grown in population.

The justice center cost \$100 million from construction to furnishings. The parking garage for the center, at \$13 million, was completed before construction began on the justice center.

The challenge has been security.

The building was planned before 2001. After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, security needed to be tightened, Farrell said. Those needs have been addressed.

Farrell said the first floor will be home to the clerk of courts, register of wills and prothonotary's office. Higher floors will hold other offices and 16 courtrooms with space for two more. About 650 employees will move in, starting in September. The relocations are to be completed by November.

The commissioners will remain in their current office space on the fifth floor of the courthouse, he said.

Farrell said the proposed \$19 million public safety training facility for first responders in East Fallowfield will be comprised of 70 acres but only 10 acres will be used. The rest will be a buffer, Farrell said. Construction will start in 2010.

Farrell, a newly elected commissioner, said the county's three commissioners work together well as a board and "all have a sense of stewardship" regarding the county and its future.

Cozzone, the only Democratic commissioner, said Chester County is blessed with land, people and a commitment to progress.

Despite being the wealthiest county in Pennsylvania, about 4 percent of the population of Chester County live below the federal poverty line.

In fiscal 2005-06, about 7,500 people in the county needed food assistance. In the 2006-07 fiscal year, the number increased to 7,640 people, Cozzone said.

"We need to strive to do better to make Chester County the best it can be," Cozzone said.

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