

December 15, 2008

The Honorable David A. Paterson
State Capitol
Albany, New York 12224

Dear Governor Paterson:

Recently the NYS Thruway Authority released its Mobility and Modernization Study Report and discussed the “Free Urban Hybrid System,” which would accomplish exactly what we, in Western New York, have been fighting for over the past decade: the relocation of toll barriers such as Lackawanna and Williamsville, thereby eliminating tolls from within the commute area of Buffalo. While proposed system wide, the logical starting point for this re-engineering of the collection system could start right here in Western New York with a pilot program. This study reflects that the Thruway Authority in no uncertain terms supports a plan which would accomplish exactly what we have been fighting for. However, as with many good ideas, the implementation makes sense, but lacks a funding source. Therefore, I was interested to note that the objective of President-elect Obama’s Economic Recovery plan is to spend money on capital projects to stimulate job creation and retention. While I am well aware that “shovel-ready” projects will have higher priority under the stimulus plan, I believe that the relocation of the Williamsville toll barrier would be further along and would perhaps meet these criteria. That being said, steps need to be taken to move the Lackawanna relocation project further into the “shovel-ready” classification in the event supplemental stimulus funds are available later in 2009 or in 2010

One of the findings of the February 2004 Lackawanna Toll Barrier Relocation Study, which I first requested in 1999, concluded that by closing Lackawanna, Blasdell (Exit 56), Hamburg (Exit 57) and Evans (Exit 57A) toll collection operations, the savings on operations and maintenance would exceed revenues lost by a significant amount. The Executive Summary states that “revenue losses are more than offset by reduced collection costs in both scenarios, resulting in a net operational gain.

The net increase in revenues to the NYS Thruway would begin at \$500,000 and would by 2025, exceed \$1.2 million, thus proving that relocation of these barriers make financial sense. This long-term financial benefit to the Thruway Authority is an additional consideration one would hope would be considered. The only piece of the puzzle that is missing is the capital construction costs of the new high speed “hybrid” model. Western New York would be the logical “pilot project” for the remainder of the Thruway.

If we collectively make these relocation projects a high priority of the business and political communities, we may have the unique opportunity to accomplish something on a larger scale than has ever been dreamed possible. No one will ever forget the excitement in our region when then candidate for governor, Eliot Spitzer, declared that the tolls on the I-190 would come down. One year later, after the collective will of the community was heard and acted on, those tolls were gone. The pride felt throughout our region was intense as the residents of WNY felt that all too rare sense that the little guy actually won.

Our community has endured the presence of Toll Barriers at Lackawanna and Williamsville for decades. If any part of the State is entitled to relief, it is ours. In the short term, jobs will be created in the demolition and construction of the new “Free Urban Hybrid Model” that could expand the free area for our commuters along the Thruway. Even better, our motorists will finally be free from the cost of tolls and long waits at barriers. The physical elimination of tolls barriers from within the commuting range of Western New York will have lasting financial and psychological benefits for businesses and residents alike for decades to come.

In order to attract new business and people to our community, we need to reduce the costs of living and working in Western New York. Tolls are just another wedge to drive people away while hurting businesses small and large. I look forward to speaking with you to further explore this concept.

Sincerely,

Kathleen C. Hochul
Erie County Clerk