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Freight Summit Tackles Challenges, Opportunities

More freight through the region means more jobs, more businesses and more tax base.

More freight through the region means more trucks, more warehouses and more traffic.

Finding a way to balance those conflicting impacts was the mission of some of the nation's top planning, government and industry experts as they gathered among 230 attendees last week at the first Eastern Pennsylvania Freight Summit, at Lehigh University's Iacocca Hall.

As e-commerce and two-day delivery has helped make the Lehigh Valley the fastest-growing freight corridor in the country, PennDOT Secretary Leslie Richard led a daylong discussion that laid out the freight road ahead, and debated how to keep it from going off course. After explaining that the Lehigh Valley's location within reach of 80 million consumers makes it's one of the busiest freight corridors, she quickly got to the central question of the day.

"For all of us who were struck in traffic this morning," Richards said as she opened the summit co-hosted by the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission (LVPC), "how do we keep our region livable for all residents?"

With freight traffic expected to double by 2040, there are no easy answers, but the point of the summit was getting the right people in the same room asking the right questions. With the online shopping boom, its growth is undeniable, particularly in this region. A typical warehouse of 100,000 square feet three decades ago has grown into a 1 million square-foot distribution center that now dots Valley roadways in Bethlehem, western Lehigh County and soon Allen Township.

Two-day delivery, usually by truck and through one of those giant fulfillment centers is how a growing number of consumers get their goods today.

Majestic Realty Sr. Vice President Ed Konjoyan called freight the lifeblood of the economy, and CBRE Executive Vice President Bill Wolf said despite a relatively toll-free highway system that has suddenly attracted more truck and warehouses, Lehigh Valley roads are not congested - yet. But that could change if the current growth isn't managed well, he said.

That means regional plans that consider not only the immediately area where a warehouse is built, but the entire network that will be impacted by the new traffic, said Becky Bradley, LVPC Executive Director. That requires a delicate balance of putting warehouses in the right place, and improving the road network to handle them because people aren't willing to give up their quality of life for the quick buck warehouses can bring, she said.

"We found that quality of life issues around parks, recreation and open space, in addition to air quality, are what people value most," Bradley said, referring to a recent LVPC regionwide

survey. “What they don’t like – warehouses and traffic...We need to improve our air quality and mobility.”

It will take a village – and more importantly a partnership between private companies, municipalities and planners to keep the growth from trampling the things that make the Lehigh Valley special, Bradley said.

“We’re not going to build our way out of this,” said Andy Alden, Executive Director of the Interstate 81 Corridor Coalition. “We’ve got to find better ways to do things.”

That kind of public, private partnership may also be needed to tackle what turned out to be the liveliest issue of the summit – truck parking. The last of four panel discussions dealt with what to do about truckers, who under newly-enforced rules, have to take a break after eight hours of driving, and take a 10-hour rest after 14 hours. Sounds easy enough, until you consider finding room for a 60-foot vehicle that most municipalities don’t allow to be parked along streets.

Some suggested private parking garages for trucks, but others questioned whether such a venture could be profitable. Kevin Stewart, CEO of the Pennsylvania Motor Truck Association, suggested reopening dormant former interstate rest stops, and others suggested that municipalities, by ordinance, force developers to include dedicated truck parking in their development plans.

“Truck parking is now more important to truckers than ever,” Stewart said. “They spend an average of 56 minutes of every day to find parking.”

Day two of the summit included a tour of some of the Lehigh Valley’s busiest manufacturing facilities. More than 80 people on two buses took walking tours of Mack Trucks assembly plant in Lower Macungie Township and the Zulily distribution center in Bethlehem. They also took bus tours of Lehigh Valley Rail Management, and distribution center districts in Bethlehem and western Lehigh County.

The summit, hosted jointly by the LVPC, the Harrisburg area Tri-County Regional Planning Commission and the Philadelphia area Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, is expected to become an annual event that moves around the state.

Stories about the summit by news outlets can be found here: <http://lvpc.org/index.html>