

# Building a more interconnected region

By Matt Smith

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Following nearly nine years in public office, during which I served in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and State Senate, my career path transitioned earlier this summer when I accepted the job as president of the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce. Despite this change, what remains a constant is my dedication to improving the region's economy and quality of life to benefit the people of southwestern Pennsylvania.

The mission of the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce, an affiliate of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development and its advocacy arm, is to work at the local, state and federal levels to improve the economy in the 10-county Pittsburgh region. Our mission drives us to focus our attention on a number of pressing opportunities and challenges facing the region.

One of our top priorities is to secure adequate funding and necessary maintenance of the region's transportation network of roads, bridges, ports, airports and transit, and to secure additional domestic and international air service in our region. Sustainable and predictable federal, state and local investments are essential to building and maintaining a modern, effective and interconnected regional transportation network. A better infrastructure network will enable more people to move easily from where they work, recreate, live and learn, and it will move goods from regional companies to market faster and more efficiently.

On the federal front, we are joining with chambers across 12 states and Canada — members of the Great Lakes Metro Chambers Coalition — to urge Congress to pass a multiyear surface transportation reauthorization bill that includes sustainable funding levels for the Highway Trust Fund.

Our successful advocacy in 2012 led to the passage of a roughly \$105 billion, federal transportation reauthorization bill that remained in effect until last year. That bill has since been extended on a short-term basis, but it is set to expire in October 2015. It's critical for our region's competitiveness that a long-term federal transportation reauthorization bill is passed this fall.

In Pennsylvania, we made major progress in 2013 on state transportation funding as a result of the bipartisan passage of an historic transportation funding bill, Act 89. At the time, as a state senator, I voted in favor of legislation to invest an additional \$2.4 billion annually in the state's roads and bridges by 2017-18 and provide \$500 million annually for Pennsylvania's transit agencies. This legislation represented a big win for the future of our region, and we provided crucial leadership and advocacy in getting it passed. However, this doesn't complete our critical goal of connecting people in the region to opportunity.

Many of the most vibrant regions across the nation — including those with whom we directly compete for business investment and talent — have embarked on transformational projects that have actively addressed their transportation infrastructure needs.

Our next big transportation undertaking as a region is to identify local solutions to address our infrastructure challenges and build upon the success of Act 89 at the state level. The regions that have successfully addressed this issue have done so with investment from all levels of the public sector and solutions identified by key stakeholders.

To achieve this, we must bring the same collaborative approach that has transformed our region's economy and quality of life over the past 70 years to the current challenge of expanding and improving our transportation network. By doing so, we'll create a more interconnected region that benefits everyone, now and for generations to come.



*Matt Smith is president of the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce*