

State Rep. Tom Tangretti

**Engineering and Technology Graduation
June 19, 2008**

Thank you very much for your kind invitation to be your speaker for this evening. It is a great honor.

When I was asked to speak to you, I was specifically asked to talk about a project that I have been working on for some, a project whose importance is now more evident than ever.

This project has the potential to solve one of the great problems of our region – particularly Westmoreland County: traffic congestion and the related problems it causes.

I think a discussion of this problem, and its potential solution, fits in well with an address to a graduating class whose members will be

making decisions about the future of this country.

I hope it also serves as a cautionary tale – a description of how to look out for the potential pitfalls in policy and other kinds of decisions, both public and private, that we make.

Let me start from the beginning, and see if I can give you a mental image of what the genesis of this idea was...and how I believe it can help us go "back to the future."

Imagine if you will, that it is 1945, and you need to travel to Chicago or Philadelphia or any other major city some distance from Greensburg and central Westmoreland County.

You arrive at the Greensburg Train Station on the corner of Harrison Avenue and Ehalt Street. If you know where the Red Star Brewery is today, imagine instead in its place

a bustling waiting room with travelers and baggage handlers...lines stacked 10 deep leading to ticket windows where people are purchasing tickets. The ticket agents sit behind a windowed wall where the Red Star kitchen is today.

There's a din in this large, high-ceilinged room, but above all the noise is the public address announcer informing people of arriving and departing trains and which tracks they can be accessed from.

Vendors of all kinds are hawking their wares – peanuts and cigarettes and cigars. Newspaper boys are calling out the latest headlines announcing the end of World War II, politics and other top stories. And everywhere you look there are returning servicemen – victorious in the Pacific and European theaters of war.

All of their travel needs, and all the travel needs of civilian travelers, are met through this small, but vital, transportation hub right here in downtown Greensburg.

But the Greensburg railroad station isn't just serving the needs of servicemen and other long-range travelers. Alongside of them are the routine travelers, the men and women who have a daily need to travel to Pittsburgh for work, school, shopping and other reasons. They, too, have a number of trains to choose from each morning, trains that fit their schedule and deliver them where they need to be when they need to be there.

All of this activity – troop trains, freight trains, cross-country and local commuter trains – travel in and out of the Greensburg station without a hitch, handled by a signaling system – without the benefit of computers – that was probably one of the single most important infrastructure assets that the United

States brought to bear in winning World War II and shaping the society and economy we know today.

Now fast-forward to today. Railroads have been relegated mostly to freight operations. Passenger rail service is extremely limited, if available at all, in many places. Most of the great railroads are gone, and I feel very comfortable in assuming that a large percentage of people in this room right now have never even been on a passenger train.

Automobiles and airplanes are the people movers of today. Why did that happen, and does it matter?

The loss of passenger rail service had many reasons:

The rise of the automobile and oil industries, and with it, the growth of their influence on government.

The freedom of movement that the automobile offered the American people, especially when the automobile became affordable for most Americans.

Federal and state laws governing development and housing that encouraged movement away from city centers into more suburban and rural areas. Thousands of acres of farmland were developed for post war, single-family housing in the suburbs, and the FHA and VA were providing low interest mortgages to people willing to move into these areas.

The construction of more and better highways, particularly President Eisenhower's National Defense highway system, which of course, became the interstate system.

The growth of the airline industry as more rapid travel to far-away places became essential on the world economy.

And, of course, for the longest time, the price of gasoline was only pennies in this country. The cost of filling the tank wasn't something people worried about, if they even thought about it.

For more than 60 years our country has seen this pattern of development and growth – the major cities were abandoned by industry and then the population – everyone spreading out and relying more and more on the automobile not just as a way to get away, but as a necessity for getting to work, school, the grocery store and even the neighbor's house.

We have become a car-centric society, and still – even with today's gasoline prices and environmental problems – cling to the ideas and patterns that first made us that way.

In this kind of a world, commuter rail service – with its defined places of embarkation and debarkation, is replaced by the more "flexible" car and the bus. And the relatively sedate and refined luxury that passenger train service offered has been replaced by the speed and bare-bones nature of air travel.

But there are many indications now that it may be time to start rethinking this pattern. It may be time to reconsider our choices – at the government level, at the business level and at the personal level.

Our great cities have lost their middle class, and our inner-city schools are in disarray.

Our highways are congested beyond what anyone would have imagined just a generation ago. Some people are now commuting up to 2 hours to work, one way. During rush hour, a trip to Pittsburgh from

Greensburg on the Parkway can take an hour.

On top of all that, we now know better than we ever did before just what the carbon dioxide and other particulates that our cars are spewing into the air are doing to our environment and our health.

And the so-called convenient and quick option of before – air travel – isn't so quick or convenient anymore. 9/11, the rise of fuel costs and the state of the airlines has made flying perhaps the worst travel option of all, these days.

With the security measures now in place, consistent delays and other considerations, a "quick" air flight from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia can now take longer than simply driving across the state.

I don't know how many of you have had the chance to travel to Europe, but if you have, you know that the approach to travel there is much different than it is here.

And regardless of what you think about other aspects of their culture or politics, in Europe, I think you have to agree that their approach seems to make more sense.

It is not because Europeans are smarter than us, or that they value the freedom to travel where they want, when they want less than we do. But the fact that space and fuel have always been limited, and expensive, in Europe has made the automobile much less alluring, and suburban living – away from work – much less attractive.

As a result, Europeans have always cherished their passenger rail industry as an efficient, inexpensive and intelligent way to get to where they need to go and where they

want to go. A person living in almost any European city can live and work without a personal vehicle ... public transit – and especially rail transit – is a way of life.

And now, here in the United States, we are starting to move "back to the future" so to speak.

Increasingly, we find people longing for the days when they could walk to the grocery store, walk to work, walk to school.

The high cost of fuel and the hassle of air travel are leading to a change in mood, and this change in mood is leading to a new movement in development. Developers are beginning to answer the call by bringing projects back to our downtowns, and by creating vertical housing options that were unheard of just a few years ago.

People are starting to understand that we are dangerously close to passing the point of no return on our environment, if we haven't already done so.

And the international situation has, for many people, taken the decision about whether or not to use their car, or even where to live, completely out of their hands. For more and more people, out of necessity or out of a sense of doing what is right, living closer to work and using public transportation is becoming a reality.

Unfortunately, making that move to public transportation is not as easy here as it is in Europe and other parts of the world. Our decades of dependence on the automobile have whittled our public transportation options. Here in Westmoreland County, public transportation primarily means taking the bus.

Being a member of the Transportation Authority, I can tell you that people are exercising that option in increasing numbers. Every time gas goes up another dime, we see 10 or 20 more people get on the bus. In fact, we've added four more buses to our already existing fleet of flyers – the buses that go to Pittsburgh – and we will take delivery of four new coaches in September.

But while bus service can certainly decrease costs and headaches for commuters, it doesn't really get them to their destination any faster – they are still in the same traffic they were before – and we are still polluting the air with every gallon of diesel fuel we burn.

That's why we need to go back to the future, and make it possible for people in Westmoreland County to do something their grandfathers did – get on a train in

Greensburg or Latrobe and commute by rail to Penn Station in Pittsburgh.

Imagine, thousands of people in Westmoreland County parking their cars during the workweek and telling the parking concessionaires in Pittsburgh to kiss their respective gas tanks.

We can do this, and we are trying to make it happen.

The Transportation Authority has been working for five years to make commuter rail service between here and Pittsburgh a reality, and we are about to complete a major piece of the puzzle by the end of the year.

Ridership, capital costs, operational costs and right-of-way issues will be finalized in a study performed by a nationally recognized consultant. We should know at that point exactly what it is going to take to provide rail

service from here to Pittsburgh on a daily basis.

When we started this journey, gas was about \$1.85 a gallon, and it was anyone's guess whether we could ever get the capital funding necessary at the federal, state or local level to fund such a project. After all, we are talking about \$250 million to \$300 million to build and buy the rolling stock necessary to provide the service, and another \$30 million every year to subsidize operational costs.

But when you think about it, building an additional bus way, or upgrading and expanding our highway system to the extent that would be necessary without making more of an effort in public transportation would cost at least four times that much.

And folks, if there is one thing we have learned in the past three decades, it is that continuing to build highways will not solve or

congestion problems. Most highways we build today are inadequate for the amount of traffic they must handle before they are even completed. We cannot keep up...just look at the intersection of Route 30 and the Amos K. Hutchinson Bypass.

That's why we need to strike while the iron is hot. Four dollars for a gallon of gas represents an economic hardship for many people – I know that -- but if we are smart, it also represents an opportunity. People's eyes have been opened, and they can see the futility and vulnerability of our current transportation system. Commuter rail makes sense, especially for our region. We can and should make this happen.

But beyond this one project, I am hopeful that with the focus of the world on the way that carbon-based energy sources have impacted our environment, our economy and our society in a negative way, the emphasis of

overall transportation policy – at the local level, state level and national level, will change.

I would love to see us take this opportunity to change our focus from highways and cars to public transportation. That will be a monumental undertaking, though, and it will be up to the people of your generation to make it happen.

So many of us will not be around to see this trip "back to the future," but most of you will.

So the decisions you make are so important. Remember to make those decisions based on long-term vision and the needs of our society. It seems to me that we lose our way when we base our decisions on short-term profits instead of the long term health of our people, our economy and our planet. We have been doing way too much of that in the

past few decades, and nowhere is that more evident than in our transportation policy.

In a way, those shortsighted decisions are coming back to haunt us now. We cannot allow this to continue happening. I challenge you to be the people who not only will complete our local commuter rail project, but also take responsibility for addressing the other quality-of-life issues and needs that currently confront us.

The things that we once took for granted we can take for granted no longer. It will take effort, commitment, intelligence and creativity to address these issues that are plaguing us most as we begin the 21st century....your effort, commitment, intelligence and creativity. I and many other people are counting on you to take us on that journey back to the future, and excited to see how you will do it.