

# Regional transit eyed for future

## New travel options envisioned with a combined authority

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Northeast Pennsylvania public transit riders may eventually take buses directly between Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, rather than having to transfer to a different bus in Pittston to make the trip.

County officials envision new travel options — like a direct bus link between the cities — among many benefits of merging several mass transit agencies in both counties into a single Lackawanna-Luzerne Regional Transportation Authority. The state Department of Transportation hired con-

sultant HNTB Corp. to study the move, which would create the state's third largest transportation authority. The cost of the study was not available Monday.

If it happens, Lackawanna and Luzerne county officials foresee having more clout to attract state and federal grant money to improve Northeast Pennsylvania's transportation network for buses, the region's growing

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rail industry and Wilkes-Barre/Scranton International Airport.

One regional authority would also mean better service through collaboration, plus lower costs and improved efficiency through consolidation, Lackawanna County Commissioner Corey O'Brien said Monday.

"We no longer live on an island," Mr. O'Brien said. "Our future is inextricably tied to our neighbors. Our success is their success, and their success is our success."

Luzerne County Councilman Jim Bobeck agreed both counties share a regional economy and said a broader

public transit system could be attractive to new employers.

"You need regional transportation for the entire area," Mr. Bobeck said. "One reason we're struck in this quagmire is people have had a provincial view for too long."

The HNTB Corp. study will include the airport, COLTS, Luzerne County Transportation Authority, Pennsylvania Northeast Regional Railroad Authority and Luzerne County Rail Corp. Hazleton is not participating.

The consultant will study the feasibility and financial impact of creating the authority, including benefits, challenges and a possible organizational structure,

according to a PennDOT document detailing the work.

Part of the idea is exploring cutbacks in management and administration. The plan will assume no changes to union jobs.

"The consultant will... prepare high-level profiles of proposed regional transportation service, customer service, fleet, facility, infrastructure and administrative functions," the PennDOT document said.

Other areas of study include ways to centralize functions, cut overhead costs and impacts on outstanding debt.

Hazleton Mayor Joseph Yannuzzi did not believe his city would benefit from partic-

ipating. The city's bus operation is different from COLTS and LCTA, as the city buys the buses, but a contractor runs the service, owns the facility and handles other details like insurance, he said.

PennDOT is encouraging transit agencies to merge and has incentives available through the state's new \$2.3 billion transportation funding package to explore consolidation, said acting Press Secretary Rich Kirkpatrick.

Transit agencies in Lancaster and Berks counties recently announced they are merging administrative functions, he noted.

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