

Straight Talk About 322

By Stephen M. Sweeney, Gloucester County Freeholder Director

Over the past couple weeks, there have been several letters written in various newspapers that inappropriately categorize the 322 By-Pass project that Gloucester County and the NJ DOT have proposed in order to relieve the traffic failure that occurs daily in Harrison Township. In addition, many writers mistakenly assume studies like the 1997 DVRPC East-West Study are a complete solution to the traffic gridlock in the Mullica Hill and Richwood area. These letters would lead one to believe that if improvements were made along Routes 538 and 607 then the traffic would magically disappear through Mullica Hill and Richwood.

The problem here is the reality of what this report says: “It must be noted that improvements to [Route 538] do not eliminate the need to provide improvements along US 322 between the Commodore Barry Bridge and NJ 55. This route is not intended to be a replacement of US 322 but a way to safely aid the east-west flow of traffic in this area of the county. Regardless of the condition of the county road network, US 322 remains a vital east-west highway and has several existing deficiencies which need to be addressed. These deficiencies include the sharp curve east of I-295 and congestion points in Mullica Hill and Richwood.” These are not my words. They are a direct quote from this study that some writers either refuse to consider, or are blatantly intending to confuse people. Either way, it is misinformation that is being distributed and I want to clarify by providing readers with facts.

Since the 1997 DVRPC East-West Study was issued Gloucester County’s population has grown significantly, and in 2000 the county was named by the US Census as one of the fastest growing counties on the eastern seaboard. According to a growth projection study released just last week by the DVRPC, Gloucester County will see its population grow by 35 percent by the year 2035. Harrison Township’s growth is anticipated to increase by 81% by 2035 from its current population.

Another misconception that these letter-writers portray is that their traffic problem should be diverted to surrounding towns like South Harrison and Elk. The County has, and will continue to make, necessary improvements to Routes 538 and 607 as suggested in the DVRPC East-West Study. We recognize that this is a regional issue; however Harrison needs to shoulder some of the responsibility as they assisted in creating this problem via their master planning. You don’t fix problems by “pointing the finger” and pushing this issue to another municipality.

Secondly, a few letter writers inappropriately state that the county will be taking and digging up graves. This comment is as insulting as it is false. The by-pass project will not disturb any burial grounds now or in the future. To assist in

keeping these burial grounds serene, the county proposes a “cut section” where the road would be several feet below grade and provide a natural sound barrier and virtually no visual impact. This is much different than cemeteries located off of roadways where grave sites are visible from street level, such as Calvary Cemetery on Routes 38 and 70 in Cherry Hill or St. Mary’s on Browning Road in Bellmawr, or even Gloucester County’s Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Monroe.

We have listened and have forwarded many comments and concerns that the public had to the design engineer, who will be doing alternative analysis and feasibility studies, as well as more computer modeling. Although this engineering design may take up to 12-18 months, we will be prepared in September to show a computer generated model of whether the by-pass concept works. Final engineering has not been completed nor was our “concept” the final design.

Finally, I believe we all know that a solution is needed. There may be some discomfort during this project, as there is with any major improvement, however the end result will alleviate one of the worst traffic situations in Gloucester County, if not in all of South Jersey. We have been, and will continue to be, transparent through this process. We have made it a point to include the public and we will do so when the design plans are completed. There are no surprises and will be no surprises during the process. We are asking for the public to be patient until the plans are finished so that decisions can be based on facts.

Stephen M. Sweeney
(856) 853-3390