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## Leasing turnpike jeopardizes safety

By Carolyn Welsh

, When disaster strikes, emergency responders often need to quickly travel great distances to assist the injured, contain the damage and investigate the cause. In many counties throughout Pennsylvania, emergency responders rely on the Pennsylvania Turnpike to connect them with people in need.

That is why emergency service providers across the Commonwealth are opposed to any proposal to lease, sell or privatize the Pennsylvania Turnpike to a private contractor. The turnpike is a Pennsylvania asset that we just cannot lose.

The office of sheriff is a full partner in law enforcement in Pennsylvania, responding to all types of emergency situations, including accidents, natural disasters and criminal activities. Our deputies receive extensive law enforcement and first responder training. Sheriffs' offices often rely on the Pennsylvania Turnpike to respond to emergencies, as well as transport prisoners and serve warrants.

Each year, 150 million vehicles use the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Emergency service providers respond to life-and-death calls along the 514 miles of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. In return, the turnpike compensates the emergency service providers through agreements between the organizations. Many of these associations rely on this revenue to fully serve the public safety needs of their communities.

State lawmakers need to consider these critical points as they review any proposal to privatize this Pennsylvania asset. First, there is no guarantee that a private operator will honor the commitments with emergency service providers. A private operator would have an incentive to drop the service commitments in an effort to create as much profit as possible for shareholders.

As a public safety official, I am concerned about how we effectively respond to emergencies or disasters. In the event of a natural disaster, environmental accident or a terrorist attack, it may be necessary to move large numbers of people from one region of the state to another. The turnpike, as a limited-access highway, can become a one-way evacuation route by closing the ramps and forcing traffic to go east or west, north or south. The rest stops can be turned into emergency areas where food, water and medicines are dispensed. Again, the turnpike is a Pennsylvania asset we cannot lose.

The turnpike is also taking advantage of new technology to make the highway safer. The turnpike is using a cutting-edge video and data system to provide instant information to emergency responders, as well as signboard and radio alerts to drivers. The more information first responders have when they arrive on an emergency scene, the better they can help the injured and protect themselves in dangerous situations.

The turnpike's investment in technology shows its commitment to the public. There is no guarantee that a private company, which must first consider the profits for its shareholders, would make this type of investment in safety technology.

As a publicly owned and publicly managed asset, the Pennsylvania Turnpike has proven its commitment to public safety by investing in technology and reaching agreements with emergency service providers across the state. Emergency responders have no expectation that a private, overseas-based operator would share the same commitment.

We need to keep the Pennsylvania Turnpike a public asset dedicated to public safety. Let's not risk our ability to save and protect lives by handing over this major transportation asset to a private company.

(Chester County Sheriff Carolyn Welsh is the first vice president of the Pennsylvania Sheriffs' Association. She was recently awarded the 2008 Crime Prevention Award presented by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency.)

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