



NEW JERSEY SENATE

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COMMITTEES
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Sent via Email and Regular Mail

March 27, 2020

Diane Gutierrez-Scaccetti, Commissioner
Chair, South Jersey Transportation Authority
PO Box 600
Trenton, NJ 08625-0600

Dear Commissioner Gutierrez-Scaccetti:

Given the current State of Emergency, I respectfully ask the South Jersey Transportation Authority cancel its April 1st and 2nd public hearings on your proposed toll hike.

We all agree right now our first priority has to be the health and safety of our families. At a time when the immediate focus of government's energies are directed at slowing the spread of the coronavirus, it makes no sense to hold any public hearings on proposed plans unrelated to the State's response to COVID-19. With families losing their jobs and businesses closing their doors, it is unfair and unreasonable to expect the public to fully evaluate SJTA's plan and offer substantive comment on your toll hike. Essentially, the SJTA is slipping in a toll hike under the cover of a crisis.

Moreover, the Legislature is working together to find meaningful ways to ensure our economy recovers and provide hope for our families. For example, we recently passed a bi-partisan package of bills to help families recoup lost wages, provide zero interest loans to assist businesses, and extend the deadline for tax filings. We took these measures to ease the pain of our families who are struggling and deeply worried about their financial future by putting more money into their pockets to stabilize our economy. The timing of your proposal couldn't be worse. While we are trying to soften the blow and give our families hope, your 41% toll hike indexed to increase 3% annually, will cause further anxiety and uncertainty by forcing working families to pay money out of their pockets they don't have each time they drive to and from work.

Further, the Greater Atlantic City Chamber of Commerce agrees with me and opposes your toll hike because 70,000 Atlantic County middle-class families depend upon tourism for their

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jobs. Atlantic County's \$7.4 billion hospitality industry already provides \$817 million in State and local taxes, making us the largest contributor to the State's overall \$45 billion tourism industry and the most significant funding source for the State's senior and disabled benefits programs. Your proposed toll hike is counterproductive. Right now, we should be finding ways to encourage more visitors so we can rebuild our tourism industry. In contrast, your plan will only discourage future tourists, making our economic recovery following this crisis harder to achieve, which is why the business community, local families, and civic organizations have contacted me in opposition to your plan. Please don't choke the goose that lays the golden eggs.

Consumer demand is going to drive our recovery which is why we need incentives, not a toll hike, to ensure our visitors return to our casinos and beaches to spend money. Last year, nearly 20 million vehicles passed through the Expressway's Pleasantville Plaza alone. We need to turn on the spigot of passenger vehicles and casino buses flowing into Atlantic County to build back the number of visitations as quickly as possible to open up businesses and put our families back to work.

Perhaps SJTA's plan merited public consideration when it was conceived prior to the State of Emergency. However, circumstances have changed dramatically, and I respectfully ask SJTA to consider the current State of Emergency, what our families and businesses are going through now, cancel the public hearings, and re-consider your plan to raise tolls.

Sincerely,



CHRIS A. BROWN

State Senator, District 2

cc: Hon. Dennis Levinson, Atlantic County Executive
Hon Frank Formica, Chair, Atlantic County Board of Chosen Freeholders
Hon. Marty Small, Mayor, City of Atlantic City
Hon. Sony McCullough, Commissioner, SJTA
Stephen Dougherty, Executive Director, SJTA
Michael Chait, President, Greater Atlantic City Chamber