

## **Our view: Fund Jersey Shore oceanfront paths, crucial infrastructure that must be maintained**

When something lasts a century, perhaps it's not surprising that New Jersey would give it little thought and less funding for maintenance.

But eventually the century or so is up and the things need to be replaced. Such is the case with two star attractions of the Jersey Shore, the Atlantic City Boardwalk and the Wildwoods Boardwalk. Both are crucial to the state and its tourism industry, and both need to be rebuilt. Not only must that be done, but appropriate government responsibility for these crucial pieces of infrastructure -- including their brethren, the paved oceanfront promenades of other ocean resort municipalities -- should include their proper maintenance going forward.

Assemblyman Vincent Mazzeo has taken up the cause, sponsoring a bill that would add the words "boardwalks" and "promenades" to the state law designating the many meanings of "public highways" eligible for transportation aid.

This is not a stretch by any means. These oceanfront walkways are all legal streets -- paper streets, of course, since vehicle traffic is excluded from them. Already among the many pieces of infrastructure considered public highways are pedestrian and bicycle pathways where they are part of streets and bridges.

The value to the state and its people of the boardwalks and promenades is beyond question. In Cape May County they are second only to the ocean beaches in attracting 9 million visitors annually who spend about \$1.5 billion. Senate President Steve Sweeney has called them a bargain, considering the county sends the state \$550 million a year in revenue mainly from its tourism.

Mazzeo's bill would make counties and municipalities hosting the boardwalks and promenades eligible for aid from the state's Transportation Trust Fund. Since such aid is based on mileage and these oceanfront paths are all a small fraction of the length of typical roads and highways, they would get a modest amount of state support.

The bill rightfully specifies, then, that the transportation commissioner annually allocate at least \$4 million in grants from the Local Aid Infrastructure Fund to boardwalk projects through 2031.

Even this isn't nearly enough, since due their age, exposure to the harsh salt and sun of the beach, and decades of neglected maintenance, the famous boardwalks need full replacement. That is expected to cost \$50 million in Atlantic City (where federal funding helpfully rebuilt a stretch the past couple of years) and \$70 million in the Wildwoods.

Maintaining boardwalks and promenades should have been normal and customary government infrastructure work all along. Yes, they may have been local creations decades or even more than a century ago, but state government has gotten its share of the value they've created as if it were a full partner in the projects.

Remediating this situation soon will give the state another benefit -- bolstering its case for the unavoidable reform of the revenue source for the Transportation Trust Fund. That money now comes from gasoline taxes,

which diminished with hybrid vehicles and high mileage mandates, and will plummet as New Jersey and the federal government compel consumers to switch to electric vehicles that pay no gas tax at all. Transportation infrastructure will have to be funded by user fees or general tax revenues, and getting public paths so widely enjoyed for the money should make that more palatable.

Mazzeo had it exactly right when he recently said, “Boardwalks are a mode of transportation for pedestrians, cyclists, trolleys and more. With this bill, boardwalks will be recognized as the transportation infrastructure they are.”

Last month the Assembly Transportation and Independent Authorities Committee voted unanimously in favor of the bill and referred it to the Assembly Appropriations Committee. Considering that the state is flush with pandemic aid and federal infrastructure aid seems likely, getting this sensible and responsible approach to boardwalks and promenades through the Legislature and signed by the governor shouldn't be challenging. We hope it happens soon so the long overdue work can begin.