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JUNE 25-JULY 1, 2008

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Bland provides a path for regional transit

by C. Denise Johnson

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The quantum leap of the price for a gallon of gas, the final stages of boring for the North Shore Connector under the Allegheny River, and an uncertain funding future of mass transit within the county all combined to make the June 19 power breakfast meeting a must on the morning agenda for members of the African American Chamber of Commerce as Port Authority CEO Stephen Bland presented an updated overview of the transportation agency.

Entrepreneurs and corporate reps alike filled the Rivers Club's dining room to capacity to receive firsthand information on the status of

public transportation, to make buses and light rail look more attractive as workers look to find ways to cut the cost of commuting. Cost-cutting and efficiency were among the topics Bland raised as he outlined operating costs and the need for union concessions.

Bland open his presentation with an overview of Act 44, a state law passed last year that funded transportation projects through higher turnpike tolls, borrowing from the Turnpike Commission and implementing tolls on Interstate 80. However, the federal government has yet to approve the I-80 toll and Gov. Ed Rendell has proposed leasing the turnpike to private operators as a funding alternative.

Bland then segued to the status of contract negotiations among Port Authority bus drivers—many of whom are considering early retirement to protect their lifetime insurance benefits. The current contract expires June 30.

"While Act 44 created stable and predictable funding for infrastructure, budget challenges—so-called "legacy costs" of pension and health care costs—will require union concessions," Bland said. "Restructuring benefit costs with bargaining unions to manageable levels and improved service efficiency—opportunities to better service communities—will lower overall operating costs."

Bland also discussed Connect 09, a strategic transportation development plan and a bot-

tom-up examination of bus services that will include an extensive public input process. Other components of Connect 09 include a SmartCard transit pass fare payment initiative to replace the current 19-year old transit box system (which, led Bland to say, "if it's old enough to vote, it's old enough to be replaced") and the final impact of the North Shore Connector on PAT's transit services.

Bland said when completed, the under-river tunnel will be "a regional asset that will connect Station Square to the Golden Triangle and the North Shore" and could eventually be the first leg of an airport line and in its peak construction phase, could generate up to 3,000 construction and position jobs."