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Free ride on bridges must end

Splish. Splat. Squish. Why is it whenever the Delaware River Joint Toll Bridge Commission explains a policy or a hiring or future funding mechanism (i.e., a toll hike), people feel the need to check the soles of their shoes for something that doesn't smell right?

It's happening again. The people who brought you a monster toll increase in 2002 (partly to hire an anti-terrorism security force, but mostly to make sure family and political friends of the agency would continue to have a supply of limited-skill jobs) are trying to explain why commission employees get a free ride whenever they cross one of the commission's toll bridges.

Here's the official answer: Because other agencies do it.

Why do they do it?
Because it's an easy-to-absorb perk that the commission can hand out to their workers.

Well, this perk smells. No surprise there. The commission should end it and make employees pay their own way — except, of course, when they're on official business.

After The Star-Ledger of Newark broke the story about Port Authority employees and retirees getting a free E-ZPass to travel on New York-New Jersey bridges and tunnels, The Express-Times asked the question of the toll bridge

COMMISSION PERK MUST GO

commission. A spokesman responded that the commission gives up \$75,000 to \$96,000 a year to grant this privilege to its full-time employees. To its credit, the commission doesn't extend the perk to commissioners, retirees and part-timers, as the Port Authority does.

Still, a toll dollar not collected is a dollar passed along to the people who do pay the freight.

The most galling aspect of this benefit isn't the money involved, though. It's the double standard the commission uses in deciding who slides and who pays. Last month collectors at the Route 22 toll bridge insulted volunteer firefighters who were headed from Warren County to a fire parade in Tatamy, charging them for the crossing because it was a nonemergency situation. The commission's policy is to let emergency services — police, fire, ambulance squads — pass free when they're on official business.

So why isn't that the policy for the commission's employees? It's insulting that cash-strapped squads and unpaid firefighters have to pony up.

You can't have it both ways.

Change the employee policy. And while you're at it, give the volunteers a break.

Musikfest a pleasant escape from reality

It was the worst of times; it was the best of times. That pretty much sums up life in the "outside" world versus life at this year's 10-day run of Musikfest.

In the "outside" world, it was the worst of times as a weak economy and higher prices on everything from gasoline to grapes continued motivating many consumers to practice austerity. Less spending, less travel, less fun.

But "inside" Musikfest, it was the best of times as crowds flocked to Bethlehem in record numbers to soak up the music, sample the cuisine and celebrate the summer. More people (a record 1.15 million). More spending (\$3.8 million in food and beverage tickets; and \$1.9 million in concert tickets). More fun.

There are those who argue Musikfest, just finishing its 25th year, has grown too big and lost its hometown charm. But the visitors who crammed the streets and plazas proved the Lehigh Valley's biggest and best-known music fair is more popular than ever.

The folks at ArtsQuest should be commended for bringing an enjoyable mix of talented musicians and groups to the free venues as well as the paid concert stages.

We would suggest that they take a much-deserved bow. But they're already busy planning for Musikfest 2009.

OUR READERS WRITE

West Ward upgrades should also include stadium area

Greetings from the quiet West Ward: Kudos to Mayor Panto, Chief Palmer and the Easton Police Department. The banning of young people from Vandervoer Playground has been a huge success. Gone, for now, are the drug dealers, late-night noise and the congregating gang members. It's actually quiet around here at night.

I see this as a plus for the neighborhoods surrounding Vandervoer. It's one of the many positive things happening in the West Ward these days. Gary Bertsch, program manager of the West Ward Neighborhood Partnership, deserves credit. The Centennial Park group also has done great things by providing youth activities this summer.

Despite these positives in my neighborhood, there are still glaring deficiencies. The worst of these come from the biggest landlord in the area, the Easton Area School District. The deplorable condition of the area surrounding Cottingham Stadium casts a pall over the entire neighborhood.

Some of the worst offenses are rusting fences that are broken and falling down, knee-high weeds, cracked cement walls and litter everywhere. One weed has managed to transform itself into a small tree that blocks the sidewalk and will need to be taken down with a chainsaw.

For a district that seems to spend taxpayer money with reckless abandon, fixing these problems would seem to be a simple deal. A cleaned-up property would be a better welcome mat to the many people who gather for football games.

It would make the neighbors, who are taxpayers, happy. It would also be one of the few projects proposed by the board that doesn't come with a price tag in the millions. It seems like a good deal to me.

TIM PICKER
Easton

Better uses for money set aside for free crossings

Gee, what a surprise. The Delaware River Joint Toll Bridge Commission "workers" get a free pass and have been for years ("Free pass to cross river for agency employees," story, Wednesday).

I wonder how firefighters who regularly risk their lives feel about that — and \$96,000 to boot. Take that money and put it back into the cost of repairs instead of taxing the many who have to pay.

Think about it. Back in the day, I imagine it wasn't easy dodging cars and trucks while scrambling for those loose dimes and quarters that ricocheted off the toll baskets. Now it's a little easier. They get to stand there with their Clint Eastwood stares and cheap sunglasses.

What it boils down to is that we all have to pay so the brave men and women of the DRJTC can get a free pass. And let us not forget, maybe some of that money should be put away in case there really is an attack on the bridge!

MICHAEL P. HAGAN
Palmer Township

Companies' inaction only leads to more nuisances

Recent letters on this page have addressed our ongoing problems with "bridge jumpers" at the Reliant Energy and



Norfolk Southern Railroad property on the Delaware River in Upper Mount Bethel Township.

Yes, the area is beginning to look like an unattended trash dump. Along with other property owners in the area, I have experienced vandalism, trespassing and harassment by some of those same irresponsible individuals.

I am concerned about the safety of anyone who enjoys the river, not only from the drunk or impaired jumpers and drivers, but also from the broken glass indiscriminately thrown about the river and its banks.

In self-defense, some of us have started taking down license numbers or vehicle identification numbers of cars parked along the road and on adjacent private property. When vandalism occurs, this information will be volunteered to the police.

Do parents know what their teenagers are up to? They might find out soon; I can't imagine that those nearby new Cadillacs, Lexus and high-end SUVs and pickups are owned by the teenagers driving them.

Reliant Energy and Norfolk Southern are part of the problem. This "attractive nuisance" bridge belongs to them and exists only for power plant usage, yet they appear to be negligent by allowing this dangerous situation. I wonder if their insurance underwriter would approve of their inaction. It's only a matter of time before a serious accident occurs as a result of actions at the bridge.

DORIS MACPHERSON
Upper Mount Bethel Township

Best wishes to retiring, current food store owners

For the last 40 years Jim Hosterman and the Food Mart have been a business staple of the Belvidere community. I (and I'm sure all those who have had the pleasure of dealing with the Hostermans) wish them well in their new career: Retirement.

In addition to wishing the Hostermans all the best in retirement, I'd also like to send best wishes to the new proprietor, Gary Singh of Hope Township, who purchased the Food Mart from the Hostermans. Gary and his brother Ronnie own and operate a business in Hope and he has learned from Jim about the food business during the transition period.

I look for the Food Mart to continue to serve the community with the same quality products and service.

MARK REDA
Phillipsburg

HOW TO GET PUBLISHED

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■ **Letters:** Should be no longer than 250 words. Writers must include day and evening phone numbers for verification. Names and hometowns are published with each letter. Writers are limited to one letter per month. We reserve the right to edit or condense.

Nation's policy on energy must see change

All of us have felt the sting of high fuel costs over the last year, but what are our politicians doing to fix it?

Let's look at the facts. While world oil production has never been higher, vastly increased demand in nations like China has driven up prices. Unless this demand slows (unlikely), we won't see major adjustments in oil costs.

However, politicians such as Sen. John McCain have promoted lifting the prohibition on offshore drilling as a way to alleviate our energy crisis. McCain has even shamelessly linked Sen. Barack Obama's opposition to offshore drilling to the reason oil prices are so high.

Distressingly, these ideas have gained traction. According to a recent poll, 69 percent of Americans now support increased offshore drilling and 51 percent believe doing so will reduce the cost of gasoline within the year.

However, experts at the Department of Energy reveal that it would take about nine years before offshore drilling would lead to any increases in oil supply at all, and when they do the reduction in price would be "insignificant."

We Americans need to realize that oil will never be cheap again and that new solutions are needed. Last month, Al Gore called for 100 percent of our energy to be generated by clean, renewable sources within 10 years. A witness before Congress recently testified that there are no significant technological or engineering hurdles to making this happen.

All our country needs is the political will. Which solution will you vote for this November?

MIKE SPECIAN
Phillipsburg

China's winds of change are refreshing

What will the dragon breathe in the years after the 2008 Summer Olympics conclude? Will it be fresh air in the form of expanded economic reform, political change and environmental concern — or rhetorical smoke to continue justifying an overly intrusive governmental hand?

I asked myself a similar question during a visit to China in 2001, after listening to a group representing the Beijing Olympic Committee make its pitch for the privilege of hosting the games. And I found myself asking it again when the International Olympic Committee announced Beijing as its choice as a few



JOHN BERSIA
Guest Columnist

months later.

Today, as unquestionably spectacular ceremonies and contests unfold in and around the Beijing National Stadium, the answers remain unclear.

China's rulers would have us believe that broader reform is not only inevitable but reflective of their own intentions. Mere days before the games started, President Hu Jintao outlined a plan for "comprehensive" economic and political reforms in the wake of the Olympics.

Although I sincerely hope that is what happens, I also understand how a moribund ideology — and communism is indeed such a beast — can bite and claw as it struggles to hold on to what it once fully claimed. Consider Beijing's brutal crackdown in Tibet on the eve of the games. Ultimately, though, the death throes cannot last. Whether China's leaders truly wish it or not, the games signify the freedom to soar that they cannot artificially restrict for much longer.

The issue of further economic reform, with the goal of encouraging stable growth, is of necessity No. 1. To do otherwise — especially given recent signs of the global economic slowdown's effect on China — would present the leadership with its worst nightmare: the failure to bring an increasing number of Chinese into better economic circumstances. Absent such success, which has provided the communists a prop for decades, the much-touted, widespread satisfaction of the Chinese people would quickly disappear.

The topic of political change naturally and closely follows that of economic reform. For Hu to mention the subject with such prominence in connection with the Olympics was clearly significant. But is it realistic to think in terms of political developments that could match China's economic gains?

Perhaps not on the accelerated schedule that I have in mind, but it is possible. Imagine what could happen in China if, for example, the government extended its experiments with village democracy to higher levels. Over time, along with other reforms, it would not be far-fetched for China to evolve into a "Big Taiwan."

In that direction would lie inspiring possibilities, particularly in light of the much-improved relationship between Beijing and Taipei, largely driven by the commitment of President Ma Ying-jeou, Taiwan's recently elected leader, to reach out to China.

Finally, the environment. I have seen China's pollution and other environmental problems — mainly the consequence of mind-boggling growth — at their worst. And I have listened to Beijing's promises to make