



Turnpike Talk

By Daniel Casciato

Joe Brimmeier wanted to know what it would be like to be one of his employees.

So when the Ross Township resident was appointed CEO of the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission in February of 2003, he went on the front lines and worked in a toll booth for a week to better understand what his 2,400 employees face on a daily basis.

"People think working in a toll booth is an easy job," he says. "They ought to try it, as I did, for a week. I had people spit at me and yell at me."

Brimmeier wants to be hands-on – not to micromanage – but to learn what everyone who works for him does. "You need to learn what your people do," he said. "That's the only way to run an organization effectively. I'm very proud of the work that my employees do. They're a very dedicated group."

Brimmeier notes that very few agencies are open 24/7 all year long. "Our toll takers are there every day, no matter what day or time it is," he says. "I think there's a lack of appreciation for what they do."

The Turnpike Commission is responsible for almost 500 miles of roads and billions of dollars. "One road you can count on to be open at all times is the turnpike," he says. "Even during severe winter storms."

Brimmeier was born, raised and lived his entire life in the North Hills area. Ironically, when he was in the 6th grade, living in the East Street Valley, his family was forced to move to make way for Interstate 279. "I fully understand how people feel when they are forced to move to make way for new highways," he says. "But it's something that has to be done for the better good of all people."

Brimmeier, who is married and has two children, has been involved in public service for most of his life with over 30 years of government experience. After graduating from North Catholic High school, he earned a Bachelor and Master's degree from Youngstown State University.

He has held numerous positions with Allegheny County. He served as municipal manager for Monroeville. He later became deputy auditor general for the state and was chief of staff for U.S. Congressman Ron Klink.

With all the traveling he does weekly, no one knows the state highway better than Brimmeier. As the CEO of the Turnpike Commission, Brimmeier spends about 70 percent of his time at his Harrisburg office. "I'm usually in Harrisburg on Monday morning by nine and return back home to my Pittsburgh office Thursday afternoon or Friday morning," he says. He also spends some time in the Philadelphia office, he adds.

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Brimmeier says that one of the commission's major challenges in 2006 is to find sufficient funding for their 10-year capital projects program which reconstructs the entire turnpike. "It's a 65-year-old road and we need to totally reconstruct it," he says. "We need to install new drainage systems and a new road surface."

Three months into his administration, it was discovered that there would not be enough money to support the improvement program. "We have to find a way to increase our funds to continue the program," he said. "And raising toll rates is not an option. We made a commitment not to raise toll rates again this decade. We'll find another source of revenue."

As busy as things are these days, Brimmeier and his assistant found time to initiate a new program that helps find missing children. The commission is the first transportation agency in the country to team up with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. Missing children's photos will be displayed in the 21 service plazas along the turnpike.

"Most abducted children are taken far away from their homes, and usually in vehicles traveling our roadways. Posting their pictures on and near these roads can be a giant help in finding these kids," says Brimmeier. "Hopefully other transportation agencies across the country will follow suit."

