



NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

COMMISSIONER FRANCIS K. O'CONNOR
NJ Assembly Budget Committee
FY2026 Testimony
May 5, 2025

Good morning, Chair Pintor Marin, Vice Chair Park, and members of the Assembly Budget Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today with an update on the critical work the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) is doing and our outlook for FY2026.

I want to express my sincere gratitude to Governor Murphy for his commitment to improving our State's transportation infrastructure during his time in office. The investments made under his Administration will ensure New Jersey is stronger, more resilient, and more connected for whatever the future holds.

Primary members of the NJDOT team with me today are Deputy Commissioner Joseph Bertoni; Chief of Staff Chris Scales; and Chief Financial Officer Chuck Maciejunes.

I-80 Reconstruction

I want to start by giving an update on I-80 in Wharton. We know this is one of the most heavily traveled corridors in the state, and that disruptions caused by the emergency sinkhole repairs affect thousands of people every day. I want to assure you that New Jersey DOT is working with urgency and doing everything we can to get these lanes reopened quickly, but above all else ... we must do it safely.

The permanent long-term repair of I-80 is progressing but work to reopen two lanes on I-80 westbound is taking longer than anticipated. All lanes in both directions are still on schedule to reopen by June 25.

Under the original schedule, I-80 westbound was expected to have two lanes reopened by May 4. This has now moved to the end of May due to the sonic drilling taking longer than expected. I-80 eastbound work is progressing on schedule, and two lanes are expected to reopen in mid-May.

There are two separate crews working concurrently – one on the eastbound side and one on the westbound side – to expedite repairs. Crews will continue working 24 hours a day until repairs are completed and the highway reopened. We will continue to look for any avenues to pick up time on both sides, if possible.

Safety

What happened on I-80 is a powerful reminder of how quickly things can change on our roadways, and how important it is to have the right people and protocols in place.

Throughout all this, I've had the privilege of watching our teams rise to the challenge with urgency, skill, and heart.

They are demonstrating what real commitment looks like – what public service looks like. They show up every day for the millions of New Jerseyans who count on NJDOT to keep things moving. Their hard work and dedication helps keep the public safe on our roadways – but the truth is, they can't do it alone.

Too many people are still losing their lives, or their loved ones, in preventable crashes, and it's going to take a collective effort if we want to see real change. It's going to take awareness, accountability, and a culture of safety that starts with every person who uses our transportation system. Underlying behaviors that contribute to so many of these roadway tragedies need to be addressed and safety has to be more than a priority – it has to become a way of life. And that is what our statewide public awareness program and Governor Murphy's Target Zero initiative is working towards.

Last year, I spoke about our plans to launch a statewide roadway safety public awareness program – and I'm proud to report that it's now in full swing. The messaging is designed to do more than just inform; it aims to move people emotionally and shift deeply ingrained behaviors.

We focused on two central themes: *What If* and *Respect*. *What If* forces drivers to confront the unimaginable – what if their actions behind the wheel were the reason someone's child, spouse, or friend never made it home? And *Respect* reminds all roadway users – drivers, pedestrians, cyclists, and workers alike – that we share a responsibility to protect one another.

I'm proud and grateful to share that this messaging has garnered nearly 200 million impressions so far across billboards, radio, print, social, and digital media.

That's 200 million chances to make people slow down and think about the lives they're affecting every time they get behind the wheel.

The message is out there – and it’s gaining traction. Why are we doing public awareness outreach when it can be difficult to measure behavior change? The answer is simple – we do it because lives are at stake, and silence is not an option. But we’re not stopping there.

Target Zero

Governor Murphy’s Target Zero Initiative is the next step in turning awareness into action, and messaging into measurable results, by establishing a goal to eliminate traffic fatalities on New Jersey roadways by 2040.

Some people may hear that and think it sounds unrealistic.

But to that, I say: What’s the alternative? No one’s life is expendable. We’re not talking about numbers – we’re talking about people, families, and futures.

Target Zero reinforces the core message behind our ongoing safety efforts: every life matters, and deaths are preventable. There’s no time to waste, and work has already started.

The Target Zero Commission – which I’m honored to chair – is bringing together voices from across sectors – transportation, law enforcement, public health, education, and advocacy – and uniting them under one clear, measurable vision. While the law gives us until February 2026 to deliver a statewide Safety Action Plan, I want to move faster. The Commission’s goal is to present a draft plan to Governor Murphy before then.

The key to achieving Target Zero will be a fundamental shift in how we think about traffic safety. Instead of placing all the burden on individual behavior, we must build a transportation system that prevents serious crashes – even when people make mistakes. We have to look at how people are actually using the system and build in countermeasures to make sure mistakes don’t turn into tragedies.

With this in mind, we’re already making safety improvements at the 10 most dangerous intersections in New Jersey, with the goal of preventing fatalities and serious injuries. Three of these intersections are in Elizabeth, one is in Roselle, and there are two each in Trenton, Old Bridge, and Franklin. But I want to be clear, we won’t be stopping at 10. This is just the start, and we’ll be adding more to the list.

Upgrades to intersections will include Automatic Red Clearance Extensions, Leading Pedestrian Intervals, and Passive Pedestrian Detection Technologies. Many of these upgrades will be completed by this Spring, and all upgrades are expected to be completed at all 10 initial intersections by this fall.

Governor Murphy and the Legislature deserve enormous credit for setting such an ambitious goal with Target Zero and backing it with action. I'm proud that NJDOT will play a central role in turning this vision into reality by leveraging our partnerships and public outreach, expanding intersection improvement initiatives, and of course through continued Capital Program investments.

Every project we advance, whether it's a bridge replacement, highway reconstruction, or multimodal improvement, is an opportunity to build safety into the system by design. The safer roads of tomorrow are being planned and built today, and our Capital Program is the vehicle through which that happens.

Geotechnical Law

As we work to achieve long-term safety goals like Target Zero, NJDOT remains committed to ensuring the safety and integrity of our infrastructure through continuous evaluation and improvement of our standards and practices. The new Geotechnical Bill, which was signed into law this March (P.L.2025, c.28), reinforces and formalizes NJDOT's stringent testing and monitoring protocols and procedures for our projects.

It ensures a geotechnical engineer is involved in the design and construction phases of a project. The geotechnical engineer provides recommendations on the type and frequency of geotechnical, groundwater, and deformation testing and monitoring to be performed for a project. In addition, if groundwater testing and monitoring data was collected more than five years before construction begins, additional testing and monitoring would be required to ensure the assumptions upon which the design was based are still valid and have not changed. The law also provides for continued deformation monitoring if deemed appropriate by the geotechnical engineer.

In short, the law heightens sensitivity to the complex relationship between groundwater and surface soil, and ensures testing and monitoring protocols are in place throughout the project delivery process.

With a transportation system as complex and heavily used as New Jersey's, building additional layers of safety into our projects is a way to ensure that our infrastructure remains strong and resilient for years to come.

Stable, solid foundations below the ground are critical in safeguarding the roads and bridges above, and the millions of people who rely on them.

Bridge Safety

Since Governor Murphy took office, 438 bridges have been built, reconstructed, rehabilitated, or repaired.

There are a total of 6,824 bridges in New Jersey and 94 percent of them – or 6,432 bridges – are in acceptable condition, which includes bridges in good and fair condition. That leaves 392 bridges still in need of repair.

NJDOT is responsible for maintaining 2,597 bridges and 91 percent of those – or 2,382 bridges – are in acceptable condition. While we have made significant improvements, there is still work to be done.

We are making progress in reducing the number of bridges in poor condition, but the rate of bridges in fair condition requiring repairs is also increasing. The average age of a bridge in New Jersey is 57 years, and older bridges require more frequent maintenance. In addition, New Jersey has some of the heaviest truck traffic in the nation, and snow, ice, and fluctuating temperatures cause wear and tear on bridge decks.

NJDOT's FY2026 Capital Program provides \$1.725 billion for State and local bridges, which is an increase of more than \$300 million. NJDOT prioritizes bridge projects using many factors including, but not limited to, bridge condition, traffic volume, crash rates, regional needs, and funding availability. There are 15 new Capital bridge projects and 18 maintenance projects that are scheduled to be awarded this year. This is in addition to 85 Capital or maintenance bridge projects awarded in FY2022 through FY2024, as well as a large number of limited-scope bridge projects that are smaller and may be handled through regional contracts. There also are 154 bridge projects in some stage of design.

Bridge Fender Replacement Program and Pier Protection Program

Besides making sure our bridges are safe for those traveling over them, the Department is also investing in bridge fender and pier projects to protect the structures from possible damage caused by boat traffic underneath.

NJDOT has 75 structures spanning navigable waterways, and approximately 65 bridges are included in a federally funded preventive maintenance contract that includes regular fender maintenance.

In 2018, NJDOT established a federally funded bridge fender replacement Capital Program line item to replace, install, and upgrade waterway fender pier protection.

So far, fenders have been replaced and upgraded on 14 bridges. These bridges can now withstand the impact of a 200-ton barge and are constructed to be two feet higher than the 100-year flood stage.

Fender replacement on the Route 35 Bridge over the Manasquan River and the Route 71 Bridge over Shark River have begun, with the Route 35 fender replacement nearing completion.

A contract was recently awarded to install a new fender system at Route 35 Navesink River, where no fender pier protection previously existed. These projects improve maritime safety and ensure this critical part of our multimodal transportation system remains strong and resilient.

Projects that safeguard and maintain our bridges are one part of the broader pipeline of work being carried out through our Capital Program.

Capital Program

When I came to NJDOT last year, I was very fortunate to take the helm at a department that was already running well and delivering on our mission.

I'm proud of the work the men and women at NJDOT do every day to provide a safe and efficient transportation system in New Jersey. That work is only possible through the leadership and support of Governor Murphy and the State Legislature. You have provided the resources and support we need to do our job.

During the Murphy Administration, NJDOT has undertaken a historic level of infrastructure investment that provides the foundation for a modern and resilient multimodal transportation system to serve the public for the next 100 years.

Packed into just over seven thousand square miles is some of the most important transportation infrastructure in the country – and even the world. As the center of the Northeast Corridor, a staggering amount of people and goods travel to and move through New Jersey.

The Port of New York and New Jersey is the largest maritime port on the East Coast, and third busiest in the country. And Newark Airport is one of the busiest airports in the country for both passengers and cargo.

It is our roads and bridges that connect these global economic hubs to the rest of the country. That is why the investments we have made in transportation infrastructure are so important – not just to New Jersey, but to the country and the world.

Since the start of the Murphy Administration in FY2019, the Department has awarded over 760 construction contracts with a total value of \$7.3 billion. That’s an average of 109 construction contracts and more than \$1 billion a year for the past seven years.

So far for FY2025, as of April 10, 95 construction contracts have been awarded, released for bid, or are currently being advertised, with an estimated value of \$991 million. By the close of the fiscal year, we expect to have awarded approximately \$1.1 billion of new construction projects.

As we continue to make major investments in our infrastructure, it’s important that we look for ways to innovate and deliver that work more efficiently. Each improvement we make behind the scenes helps us better serve the people who count on us every day.

Design-Build

Design-Build is an alternative project delivery method that will expedite project delivery by allowing design and construction to take place concurrently, rather than requiring design to be completed before construction begins. This will benefit the public by reducing project duration, thus mitigating travel impacts, and maximizing the use of resources and the project budget.

NJDOT’s first Design-Build project will take place on the Route 50 Bridge over Cedar Swamp Creek in Upper Township, Cape May County.

In May, we will send Requests for Proposals to those on the short-list. Final proposals will be due mid-August. Proposal selection is expected to take place in late September.

I’m also happy to announce that our second Design-Build project has been selected, and it will be the heavily travelled Route 9W Bridge over I-95 and Routes 1&9, 46 and 4, in Fort Lee.

Design-Build can help streamline delivery, improve efficiency, and reduce costs – and that means we can move more projects through the pipeline, and optimize investments in our Capital Program at the state level.

At the same time, NJDOT continues to help county and municipal governments meet the infrastructure needs of our communities at the local level.

Local Aid

Since the start of the Murphy Administration, NJDOT has awarded more than \$3.4 billion in Local Aid funding, through both State and federal grant programs, for transportation projects that improve our communities without burdening local taxpayers.

For FY2025, we awarded \$17.4 million in funding for Safe Streets to Transit, Bikeways, and Transit Village, three grant programs that allow municipalities to address the specific needs of our most vulnerable roadway users.

Including funds in this budget proposal, the Department will have invested over \$345 million of State funds into Pedestrian Safety Grants, the Local Transportation Projects Fund, and Local Aid and Economic Development Grants since FY2021. These record investments were not seen in previous administrations.

Quick-Fix Projects

NJDOT is also able to make meaningful differences in local communities through initiatives like our Quick-Fix projects. These are improvements that the Department makes through work orders, often in response to local concerns. On average, NJDOT handles 500 work orders, costing approximately \$9 million each year.

Quick-Fix projects can include things like new signage, striping, traffic signal timing changes, or other modifications that do not require significant time to complete and do not involve roadway alterations or the acquisition of right of way. If the requested improvement falls within the limits of an existing Capital Project, the work can often be added to that project's design documents and built during the construction phase.

Quick-Fixes may be smaller in scale, but they make a great impact and improve safety for the people who need them most – pedestrians, cyclists, and other vulnerable road users.

Film and Outdoor Dining e-Permitting

Sometimes the physical work required to fix a problem is simple, but the paperwork is complicated. We made some improvements in this area by simplifying permitting process for film production and outdoor dining. Both require a Highway Occupancy Permit (HOP) and, as of May 2024, these are being processed using our innovative new e-Permitting system.

The HOP e-Permitting system is a web-based, GIS-enabled application developed to manage, track, and document all aspects of the permitting process, which greatly reduces wait times and paperwork while ensuring compliance with state and local regulations.

Under the e-permitting system, applicants now have 24/7 access to the system, which improves applicant communication and transparency, while expediting the review, processing, and approval processes. This helps us keep New Jersey production-friendly by accommodating the industry's tighter timelines. We issued five film production permits in 2024, and two this year as of April 10.

Outdoor dining permits are also processed digitally using the e-Permitting system. Prior to this, a formal process for outdoor dining permits did not exist. NJDOT has created an entirely new process specific to the review, processing, and approval of this type of permit, which provides more opportunities for municipalities to accommodate outdoor dining and support local businesses. Restaurants and other interested parties should contact their municipality, who will apply for the permit on their behalf.

Disparity Study

Improving processes is important, but so is maintaining transparency. One of the transparency-related actions that came out of Governor Murphy's 2020 State Disparity Study is utilization of the supplier management software system. This system will expand NJDOT's efforts to capture, monitor, and publicly report on all State government procurements and payments to prime and subcontractors. We are finalizing the data transfer processes and recently shifted to the procurement and implementation of the software.

The Department works with 2,696 New Jersey Unified Certification Program-certified disadvantaged firms, 829 of which are in-state.

In FY2025, as of February 1, small businesses received over 15 percent of NJDOT State-funded contract awards totaling more than \$58 million. Disadvantaged businesses received about 12 percent of our federally funded contract awards – or about \$35 million.

For professional services, the Department works with 113 consultants, 33 of which are small and/or disadvantaged businesses; and for construction services, the Department has 276 contractors, 66 of which are small and/or disadvantaged.

Additionally, 44 Small Construction Projects have been awarded, valued at \$755,000. All 44 projects were awarded to small business enterprises: two are minority-owned, two are women-owned, and one is veteran-owned.

Newark Bay-Hudson County Extension Improvements

As Chair of the New Jersey Turnpike Authority, I'd like to provide an update on two critical projects that will ensure continued safe mobility in both North Jersey and South Jersey.

First, an update on the Newark Bay Bridge replacement, which is part of the larger Newark Bay-Hudson County Extension Improvements Program.

The current Newark Bay Bridge is nearing the end of its service life and will be replaced with two new cable-stayed bridges.

The new structures will be built to modern standards with adequate shoulders for trucks, as well as added resiliency to accommodate more severe storms by improving stormwater drainage.

Permitting and environmental studies for the first phase of this project are nearing completion. The first contracts to be advertised in late 2025 or early 2026 will be for the construction of two new trestles in Newark Bay.

In order to minimize disruptions, traffic will be maintained on the existing bridge while the first of the two new four-lane, cable-stayed bridges is built. Construction will begin next year. When the new span is completed in 2031, all eastbound and westbound traffic from the existing bridge will be shifted onto it. The old bridge will then be demolished and a second, four-lane, cable-stayed bridge will be built in its place. When construction on the second bridge is complete in 2036, one of the new spans will carry four lanes of eastbound traffic and the other will carry four lanes of westbound traffic.

Interchanges 1 to 4 Capacity Enhancements

We are also making significant improvements in South Jersey. While capacity on other sections of the Turnpike has grown over the years to meet increasing customer demand, the corridor between Interchanges 1 and 4 has remained in its original 1951 configuration of two lanes in each direction.

The Interchanges 1 to 4 Capacity Enhancement project will add an additional lane in each direction throughout the entire 36-and-a-half-mile corridor. This will provide congestion relief for South Jersey, advance mobility, improve safety, and ensure truck traffic remains off the local roads.

The project will replace 56 of 66 bridges in this corridor, improve shoulders, and upgrade lighting at each interchange. In addition to improving traffic and roadway conditions, the project will also improve air quality, by reducing congestion.

Final design of the additional lanes between Interchanges 3 and 4 is underway. Construction is scheduled to begin in 2026.

FIFA World Cup

Every issue and initiative I've talked about in my testimony plays a part in optimizing our transportation infrastructure and helping move people and goods efficiently and safely. All of these systems will be put to the ultimate test for the FIFA World Cup in 2026, when soccer fans from around the globe will descend on the New Jersey, New York, and Philadelphia areas.

NJDOT began preparations for the World Cup in early 2023.

With eight matches at MetLife Stadium including the Final, and six in Philadelphia, an event of this scale requires seamless, cross-regional coordination across multiple local, State, and federal agencies. Many fans will be visiting the region for the first time.

Our primary goal is to ensure safe, efficient mobility for millions of fans, while also maintaining reliable service for everyday commuters and businesses.

This will include enhancing rideshare coordination at and around MetLife Stadium, minimizing construction disruptions on major event routes and supporting multimodal connections to the FIFA Fan Festival and other venues.

Investments made in our infrastructure now will ensure safety and reliability next summer and leave New Jersey with improved transportation infrastructure. We'll also benefit from a dress rehearsal before the 2026 event as FIFA brings several Club World Cup matches to the region this summer.

Summer 2026 also marks the 250th Anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The largest-ever flotilla of tall ships from around the world will sail into the Port of New York and New Jersey as part of the Sail 4th 250 celebration. Crowds will flock to the area for this once-in-a-generation event, and we'll be ready for them.

In Closing

My first full year at NJDOT has been incredibly rewarding. It's an honor to serve the people of New Jersey and to play a part in ensuring a safe foundation for the next generation of transportation advancements in my home state.

I want to once again thank Governor Murphy for his leadership and support, as well as the members of the State Assembly and Senate for your commitment to providing the resources we need to continue to provide a world class transportation system for the State of New Jersey. Thank you.