



A rare weekday respite from heavy traffic on the Blue Route.



ED WILLIAMS

BLUE ROUTE BLUES

THE PIECEMEAL HISTORY OF A 21-MILE
STRETCH OF ASPHALT THAT, LOVE IT
OR HATE IT, WE CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT.

BY MICHAEL BRADLEY

TUESDAY, 4:15 P.M. ... You're stuck in a southbound bumper-to-bumper nightmare approaching Exit 5.

WEDNESDAY, 8:23 A.M. ... The line for the I-76 ramp is so long you fear getting rear-ended by a passing motorist.

SUMMER FRIDAY AFTERNOON, 3:20 P.M. ... An epic backup on the I-95 ramp means a timely dinner at the Shore house is looking less and less likely.

For decades, the Schuylkill Expressway has held the title of most frustrating freeway in the Philadelphia region. But in recent years, it has had a formidable challenger. It goes by a few names: I-476, the Mid-County Expressway, Veterans Memorial Highway. But for many of us, it will always be the Blue Route—inauspiciously named after the color of the line used by highway planners more than a half century ago. Today, it's an artery so often clogged that driving apps direct motorists onto the very local roads it was supposed to unclog.



"BY THE TIME WE GOT TO THE 1970S, PEOPLE WERE MORE ENVIRONMENTALLY CONSCIOUS. PARTS OF THE ROAD THAT WERE GOING THROUGH INFLUENTIAL AREAS RAN INTO NIMBY—NOT IN MY BACKYARD."

—JIM BILELLA, PRESIDENT AND CEO, URBAN ENGINEERS

"I'm as frustrated as anybody," says Pennsylvania Sen. Tim Kearney, whose district includes several Delaware County municipalities and who met with PennDOT officials about the road not long after taking office in 2023. "When I'm driving home from Harrisburg, the hardest part of my commute is from King of Prussia to Swarthmore. As soon as it opened, the Blue Route was already not enough."

This year, the Blue Route celebrates its fully operational 35th anniversary as the final link of pieced-together beltway around the city that also includes the Pennsylvania Turnpike and I-95. Its long-fussed-over debut was heralded as a milestone, the byproduct of more than 50 years of planning, construction, wrangling, lawsuits, protests and resident acrimony.

Today, it's a source of year-round agita for commuters. In a long-overdue move, PennDOT is working on plans to turn median strips and shoulders into high-volume release valves. Over the next few years, construction will take place between the Route 3 and I-95 exits in both directions. Welcoming all vehicles, the extra lanes will open during rush hour and other heavy-travel periods. Drivers heading north from 95 should have them in 2027, while those heading south will likely have to wait until

2030. The project also includes expanding the interchange at I-95 to reduce congestion there. Naturally, the extensive road work will mean even more delays.

Until the pandemic, traffic volume along the Blue Route had been on a steady upward climb for almost 20 years. In 2000, somewhere in the neighborhood of 120,000 vehicles a day drove the Blue Route between the turnpike and I-76. By 2019, it was around 130,000. Along the span from Route 1 to I-95, the numbers grew from 95,000 to 102,000 over that same period. Thanks to Covid and the ensuing rise of the remote workplace, the volume has shrunk to a more encouraging 101,000 and 94,000, respectively. But congestion remains a daily fact of life.

"Adding lanes doesn't make everyone's lives better," says Tim Stevenson, PennDOT's assistant district executive for project delivery. "We're trying to make sure congestion isn't spilling over onto local roads."

When Stevenson started at PennDOT in 1992, its offices were in St. Davids, and he was commuting from Lancaster County. "It was an amazing freeway to have open," he says.

These days, Stevenson calls it a “workhorse”—which almost sounds like a veiled compliment. But positive Blue Route vibes are a hard thing to come by for most commuters. “Its design is horrible,” says Sean Verdeur, who drives it multiple times a week for his pool service.

For Tom Ksiazek, a professor at Villanova University, even midafternoon drives can add 30 minutes to what’s already a long commute from his Bucks County home. “Well before rush hour, it’s backed up at the Schuylkill interchange and then where it reaches the turnpike,” laments Ksiazek.

Some of the grumbling has also been directed at Swarthmore College and the surrounding communities, which are largely responsible for the four-lane tight squeeze heading through Delaware County. “Think of all the dollars wasted as people sit in traffic when it goes from six lanes to four,” Verdeur says. “All the wildlife they tried to save is now suffocating in the carbon dioxide the cars are putting out. So much for good intentions.”

The original concept for the Blue Route is almost a century old. In the early 1930s, two options for the highway were proposed as part of a comprehensive plan created by a municipal reform organization called the Regional Planning Federation of the Philadelphia Tri-State District. But due to a variety of factors—not least the Great Depression and World War II—nothing came of it until 1955, when a proposed 19-mile expressway was approved. A year later, the Federal-Aid Highway Act promised funding for up to 90% of its cost. Potential paths for the stretch were designated in yellow, green and blue. Initially proposed as red, the yellow option ran through Springfield Township and other high-density, mostly blue-collar communities in eastern Delaware County. The green route skewed farther west through what was mostly undeveloped land at the time. The map’s blue line followed a path similar to the yellow before making its way through the Crum Creek watershed and the western reaches of Swarthmore College.

The yellow route was the state’s first choice, as it was the cheapest and most direct. After protests from local residents, the federal government rejected the plan. In 1960, the state proposed an alternate blue path that bypassed Swarthmore College. This wasn’t wildly popular with homeowners in Nether Providence Township, prompting an extended delay in the selection process.

Moving forward despite growing opposition, the federal government approved a revised Blue Route plan with a few conditions: The impact on Swarthmore College should be mitigated; the state would aid the school in finding land to offset its losses; the highway’s design must conform to the area’s natural aesthetic; and portions of the Crum Creek watershed would be available for public use. The state broke ground on the Blue Route in 1966, but acquisition delays and conflicts with local municipalities would be stumbling blocks for more than 20 years. A few municipalities sued to prevent its construction, including the Swarthmore borough and Radnor and Marple townships. Inexplicably, the initial plans failed to account for interchanges, so each required separate negotiations and approvals by the state and affected municipalities. By 1970, less than 10% of the Blue Route had been built, and its estimated cost had ballooned from \$30 million to \$173 million.

In the beginning, it was easier for the government to acquire land, and there were fewer environmental considerations. But as negotiations with municipalities dragged on, things got more complicated. “By the time we got to the 1970s, people were

A BLUE ROUTE CHEAT SHEET

- **1932:** A comprehensive plan for Delaware County is released that includes a proposed expressway to alleviate congestion on local roads.
- **1955:** The Southeastern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Association approves a proposal for a 19-mile highway.
- **1956:** The Federal Highway Act bankrolls up to 90% of construction costs for the road.
- **1960:** Pennsylvania Department of Highways (later PennDOT) chooses a blue-colored route on a map for the highway.
- **1963:** Pennsylvania Gov. William Scranton approves the Blue Route project.
- **1966:** The state officially breaks ground on the Blue Route.
- **1969:** The National Environmental Policy Act is passed, requiring states to file environmental impact statements for all federally funded projects, giving Blue Route opponents ammunition in their fight.
- **1979:** The first Blue Route stretch opens between the Schuylkill Expressway and Exit 19 in Plymouth Meeting.
- **1980:** U.S. Rep. Bob Edgar establishes a task force, making changes that include fewer lanes and smaller interchanges on parts of the Blue Route.
- **1981:** The Federal Highway Administration approves the new plan.
- **1986:** The U.S. Supreme Court upholds the Third U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals’ decision so Blue Route construction can continue.
- **1991:** The Blue Route opens in full on December 19. Final cost: \$750 million.
- **2024:** PennDOT announces a multiyear plan to ease Blue Route congestion that includes flexible lanes along inner medians during periods of high traffic.

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A planning map from 1960 shows the three possible options for the Blue Route. (Right) One of many newspaper articles on the highway's stalled progress.

more environmentally conscious," says Jim Bilella, president and CEO of Philadelphia-based Urban Engineers, which oversaw construction of the highway. "Parts of the road that were going through influential areas ran into NIMBY—not in my backyard."

Swarthmore-based civil engineer Albert Federico grew up in Philadelphia and Delaware County. He spent the '90s in Florida before returning to the area in 2000, settling in Swarthmore. "When I came back from Florida and introduced myself, people would say, 'You live in Swarthmore? You stopped the Blue Route,'" he says. "I told them, 'I'm new here.'"

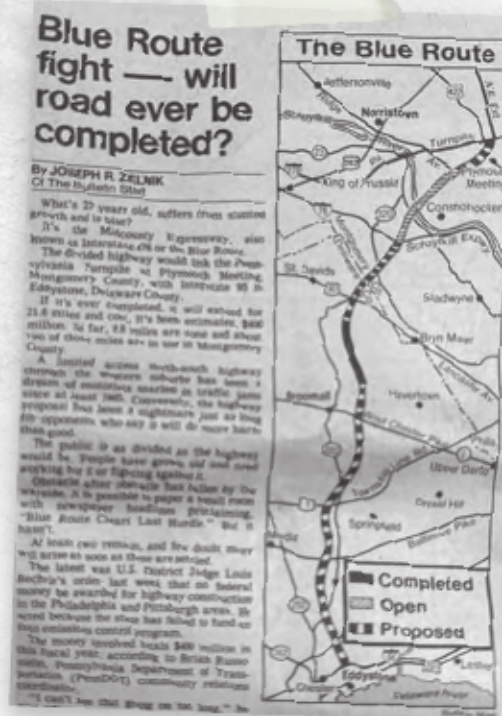
When Sony Devabhaktuni started as an assistant professor at Swarthmore College two years ago, he knew nothing about the Blue Route and its history. Now he's an expert. In the fall of 2025, he taught a class in Delaware County infrastructure. "The Blue Route has occupied such a big place in people's imaginations," says Devabhaktuni, who lives just a few blocks from campus and doesn't even own a car.

As he studied the road's history, Devabhaktuni tracked the resistance to it over the years. In the 1950s, concerns were mostly about traffic noise. In the 1970s and '80s, the topic of discussion was the impact on the Crum Creek watershed and its wildlife. "That tracks with the environmental movement," he notes.

Activists rallied behind the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, which required states to file environmental impact statements for all federally funded projects. Several EIS-related court decisions prevented work on most of the approved route during the early '70s. In 1974, PennDOT was ordered to present an EIS for each section of the Blue Route not already under construction, requiring more public hearings.

Meanwhile the protests continued, and construction limped along. PennDOT submitted a revised Blue Route plan to the Federal Highway Administration in 1978, but a state budget crisis stalled its review until a year later. In 1979, a new stretch of highway between I-76 in Conshohocken and Exit 19 in Plymouth Meeting served as a Blue Route tease for more than a decade.

Between Broomall and Radnor, a section of highway awaiting an interchange sat empty until it was finally completed in 1988. Raised in Garrett Hill, Joe Henderson recalls accessing the span near Radnor Valley Country Club and Ithan Elementary School. "You could ride bikes or walk for several miles toward the old Haverford State Hospital," he says. "I remember seeing a few dozen people walking and riding on it."



In 1980, U.S. Rep. Bob Edgar, whose district included Swarthmore and other key areas directly impacted, tried to broker a peace. If the road was to become a reality, his task force concluded, there was no way it could have the six lanes planned for the northern section that led to the turnpike. PennDOT scrapped concepts for the wider expanse through most of Delaware County, reducing it from six to four lanes and shrinking the size of the interchanges.

Meanwhile, resistance to the project began to subside. "People who wanted no Blue Route for 15 years started to write letters saying, 'Please finish this,'" says Leo Rothenberg, a Swarthmore junior who served as Devabhaktuni's research assistant this past summer.

Included in the pro-Blue Route crowd was Herb Leimbach, a Swarthmore alum and the school's golf coach in the '80s. He wrote to the school's board on behalf of alumni and faculty who wanted the road completed. In 1982, Swarthmore students Tom Klein and Boyd Brown submitted their own letter to the Philadelphia Inquirer that began, "We believe that Swarthmore College has been unjustly maligned as being unanimously opposed to the Blue Route."

They went on to extol the "multitude of benefits" the road would provide, noting that "neo-New Deal projects" like the Blue Route were in line with the college's progressive values. They also concluded that protecting open lands from the highway would hinder families "hit hard by recent Reagan Administration budget cuts." The authors closed by taking a shot at Swarthmore's "ivory tower upper-middle-class idealism."

None of this was well received by college administrators. "The president of Swarthmore called them into his office," says Devabhaktuni, who discovered the letter during his research.

The acrimony officially ended in 1986, when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a Third U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruling that the project could continue. The case centered on whether the federal government had fulfilled its requirements

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under the National Environmental Policy Act. "The first time, the district judge said the government didn't do the environmental impact statement properly," says Susan Bricklin, one of the lawyers on the case. "The second time, we presented a huge administrative record in brief form and showed arguments that supported our case."

By that point, the Blue Route's price tag had skyrocketed to more than \$600 million. There were some Hail Mary attempts at fending off the road's completion, but they were dismissed. On December 19, 1991, the Blue Route opened for full travel. But it wasn't long before discontent was brewing again.

It's hard to imagine a more thankless job than trying to ease commuter angst. "We don't hear a lot of praise," says PennDOT's Stevenson.

In working to improve the Blue Route's flow, Stevenson and fellow engineers enter directly into the fray between those who travel the highway and those who live near it. While the Blue Route was built to relieve some of the chaos on local roads, it has since contributed to increased residential and business growth nearby. Think of all the activity near Villanova's Exit 13 that wasn't there 20 or 30 years ago. King of Prussia is now a mini city, and Wilmington is far more accessible. Much of that is due to the Blue Route. "People saw the benefit of it," says Bilella. "They realized they could get to Wilmington in 15 to 20 minutes and King of Prussia in 15 to 20 minutes."

In 1996, 553,445 people lived in Delaware County. As of 2022, there were 575,182. That 4% increase may not seem like a lot, but those additional 20,000 people can tax the infrastructure and the roads. "You build a highway, and there's nothing there. But you put in an interchange, and people start to settle around it," Bilella says. "People move further and further away from the city because the highway helps their commute, but the population growth turns what was an hour commute into a two-hour commute. The office moves out to the suburbs, bringing more people. It's the nature of how suburban areas grow."

And so, the battle fought years ago to make the Blue Route as unobtrusive as possible in parts of Delaware County has led to the need for construction that will add high-congestion lanes. Once the expansion program is complete, the traffic patterns will resemble those on area bridges to New Jersey, with overhead gantries bearing lights that indicate whether a lane is open. Ideally, if there's an accident blocking a lane, an overflow passage will keep traffic moving. "PennDOT thinks this will do the trick," says Sen. Kearney. "It's just going to take time—and that's the hard part."

Adds Swarthmore's Devabhaktuni: "I haven't heard anyone oppose the plan to open the median."

What's to be done with a road that's this essential and this infuriating? As with everything in life, there is no perfect solution. "You can't build your way out of congestion," Bilella says. "You have to manage it." **MLT**



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Robert Zuritsky, President & CEO, Parkway Corporation Graduate, Harriton High, University of Maryland, Temple Univ. (MBA), Wynnewood resident shown with Hyperion Chair & CEO Charlie Crawford, center, and Hyperion President & COO Lou DeCesare



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