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EmpowerNJ Serves Legal Petitions on NJDOT and NJ Turnpike Authority Demanding Climate Action

Trenton – Today, EmpowerNJ, a coalition of more than 135 environmental, faith and social justice organizations, led by BlueWave NJ, Clean Water Action, Environment New Jersey, Food & Water Watch, Sierra Club of New Jersey, Delaware Riverkeeper Network, and Don't Gas the Meadowlands Coalition – filed legal rule-making petitions with the New Jersey Turnpike Authority (“NJTA”) and the NJ Department of Transportation (“NJDOT”) documenting the failure of those agencies to take action to reduce carbon emissions as required by Governor Murphy.

The petitions also demand an immediate halt to the \$4.7 billion Turnpike Expansion in Jersey City; that the agencies prioritize public transportation, repair projects, safe street projects, bikeways and walkways over highway expansions; and the rejection of projects that disproportionately harm already overburdened communities.

Vehicles account for 40.6% of the State's net greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs), making it the highest GHG source in the State. Governor Murphy issued Executive Order (EO) 274 on November 10, 2021, mandating as State policy a 50% reduction in GHGs by 2030. EO 274 requires all state agencies to implement the objectives of EO 274 and develop strategies to meet the 50x30 Goal.

“NJTA and NJDOT are not only failing to take the action to reduce GHGs as required by State policy, but are undermining it. NJTA's capital plan calls for spending more than \$16 billion on new highway expansion projects on the Garden State Parkway and New Jersey Turnpike with little or no analysis of whether they would increase GHGs, conflict with this State's climate goals; be cost effective; improve traffic congestion; or whether the money could be better spent on other transportation projects that would generate more jobs and economic growth without adding toxic pollutants to our already bad air. The failure to adopt a climate reduction strategy also conflicts with federal law and would make New Jersey ineligible to obtain grants available under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law,” said **John Reichman, EmpowerNJ Steering Committee member and Environment Committee Chair of BlueWave NJ.**

“Expanding the Turnpike Extension in Jersey City past our schools, playground, parks, and homes is an environmental crime. Increases in truck and other vehicular traffic will increase already elevated rates of asthma, and release toxins into the air and soil as they have in the past. This is the 2020s equivalent of using lead pipes because it's convenient. The overflow of traffic onto our local streets will make them less safe and more congested. We need to be thinking about

the best tools to solve the problem at hand and invest in mass transit and freight rail, not continuing to ignore and stomp on our urban communities, especially those who have long suffered under unjust highway expansions and industrial pollution in the past,” said **James Lee, Safe Streets, Jersey City.**

“Expanded highways do not only generate more carbon pollution. The increase in the number of vehicles on those highways means more vehicles and the toxic pollutants they generate – particulate matter, known as PM 2.5, and ground level ozone – that are particularly harmful to our most vulnerable citizens including the elderly, children, and asthma sufferers. New Jersey already has some of the worst air quality in the nation and NJTA’s plans and projects will only make it worse,” said **Doug O’Malley, Director of Environment New Jersey.**

“NJTA and NJDOT are stuck in 20th Century thinking. Traffic studies and experience also universally show that highway widenings, particularly in urban areas, will only provide temporary, if any, reduction in traffic congestion because of induced demand. Long term, expanded highways will be as congested as they were before,” said **Eric Benson, Campaign Director of Clean Water Action.** “Meanwhile, NJDOT is also ignoring studies, including one done for NJ Transit, that prove that funding and improving public transportation promotes far more economic growth than highway expansions.”

“NJ Transit, part of NJDOT, is also acting contrary to EO 274 and the intent of the EJ law by proposing a methane gas power plant in the Meadowlands – the Transitgrid Project. It will run 24/7 and emit 600,000 tons of CO2 per year along with other toxic pollutants into the air in the Kearny/Newark area, which are already overburdened communities. Despite this harm, Governor Murphy is doing nothing to deter this and NJ Transit has refused to even consider asking bidders for a renewable energy-based solution that could be implemented now,” said **Ken Dolsky of the Don’t Gas the Meadowlands Coalition.**

“NJDOT and NJTA are not complying with Executive Order 23, which requires all state agencies to consider environmental justice in their decision making. The placement and expansion of urban highways have disproportionately harmed the health and economies of minority and low-income communities, the very same communities who receive the least benefit from highway projects. When asked what NJDOT was doing to comply with EO 23 during the May 2, 2022 Assembly Budget hearing, Commissioner Diane Gutierrez-Scaccetti was stumped – she could not identify a single initiative,” said **Matt Smith, NJ Director, Food & Water Watch.**

“Numerous states – such as California, Oregon, Colorado, Washington, and Virginia, among many others – are aligning transportation planning with climate goals and have passed regulations similar to those demanded in the Petitions. NJDOT and NJTA should be following their lead. This is needed not just to reduce GHGs, but for our health, for jobs, and to promote economic growth,” said **Tracy Carluccio, Deputy Director, Delaware Riverkeeper Network.**

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