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## Gas-drilling companies pay their way

### One firm spent \$88 million this year on roads

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— While driving Route 220 north toward Towanda, one can't help but notice how hard the road feels. It's as rough and uneven as any other Pennsylvania road — until suddenly it isn't.

Somewhere between New Albany and Monroeton is a macadam oasis, a new section of road that's smooth, level, even cushy.

It's like driving on velvet. This respite lasts for about a mile until, with a bump back into reality, it returns to the regular road surface Pennsylvanians know all too well.

The smooth roads are a direct result of the millions of dollars gas companies are spending to repair the roads that have been shredded by truck traffic heading to and from Marcellus Shale gas drilling sites.

As an example, Chesapeake Energy, a gas-drilling company, has put more than \$88 million this year in maintenance, repairs and upgrades into more than 160 miles on 40 state routes throughout Bradford, Wyoming, Sullivan and Susquehanna counties, according to Brian Grove, senior director for corporate development.

"As part of its ongoing commitment to responsible operations, Chesapeake voluntarily and proactively worked with the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation and local road supervisors to identify roads affected by heavy use," Grove said. "Plans were then devised in conjunction with those regulatory authorities to repair and, in some cases, substantially improve the state roads to better handle anticipated future activity."

The \$88 million, however, does not reflect Chesapeake's additional investment in township road infrastructure, Grove said. "In the upcoming weeks, as many projects come to completion, Chesapeake will provide a comprehensive overview of its investments this year to maintain safe roadways in the communities where it operates," he said.

A few miles later near Monroeton, traffic halts while men decked out in traffic-cone orange direct the vehicles from the other side through; first one side, then the other as the construction gets done.

The increased truck traffic in Bradford County has brought increased road repairs as well. According to PennDOT, just this year in the counties of Lycoming, Tioga, Sullivan and Bradford — home of Towanda and where the most repairs have been — the agency approved 22 upgrades to various sections of state

roads, equaling about 84 miles.

Of those, as of September, nine projects were done, equaling about 23 miles.

Many state roads are "pie-crust" roads, a gravel base and an inch or two of oil and chip or blacktop. Given their location and age, many of these roads became state roads under Gov. Gifford Pinchot's administration in the 1920s and '30s and still have their original construction base.

Rick Mason, spokesman for PennDOT's District 3, noted that when these roads were built, trucks were lighter and loads were smaller; the roads weren't designed or built for what's happening today.

All these repairs are gas-drilling related, Mason said, and they're all paid for by the Marcellus Shale drilling companies, not the state.

They have to pay for them. Under the state's posted and bonded road program, heavy haulers are financially responsible for excess maintenance on the highways they use, according to PennDOT. This lets the agency maintain rural highways for use by both passenger vehicles and heavy haulers. When it becomes clear that a roadway is going to be used by heavy truck traffic, PennDOT will conduct a study to determine if the road can handle the strain.

If the highway department sets a weight limit on a road, anyone that intends to exceed the limit must reach an agreement with PennDOT to make any repairs that result.

"Any entity -- such as a gas company — that wants to (use the road) beyond (the posted limit of) 10 tons does an excess maintenance agreement with PennDOT and posts a bond on the road," Mason said. "That allows them to drive the road, and then they're responsible for repairs to it."

And repair they do.

"Two years ago, I think we had 30 or 40 roads in my district posted," Mason said. That's nine counties. "Today, we have several hundred posted and bonded roads."

In the political rhetoric that has accompanied the rapid expansion of gas drilling, proponents of the industry have been happy to report that when the gas companies repair the roads they leave them in better shape than when they arrived in the first place. But, that is mainly because the roads need to be better or they will only need to be quickly repaired again because of the truck traffic.

For example, according to a PennDOT travel advisory issued in July, reclamation work that Chesapeake Energy did to four state roads included grinding the road to a depth of about a foot; adding cement to the soil then mixing and compacting it and placing about 4½ inches of bituminous base course and 1½ inches of bituminous wearing course.

"It's also an economic decision," Mason said. "If (the gas companies) go into an area and realize they'll be in it for years on end, it makes more sense to upgrade the road." Some gas companies preempt PennDOT and approach the agency with proposals for some roads they know they want to use.

PennDOT doesn't require the companies to tell them how much money they're spending or have spent on the repairs. "As long as their proposals for upgrades meet out standards, that's something we don't need to

know," Mason said. Most contractors hired to do the work are private and PennDOT-approved.

The industry is indeed working well with PennDOT. Mason said last spring saw a number of roads torn up extensively by the gas companies, "literally dozens of roads," he said. PennDOT told the gas industry it was expected they'd make the repairs and in a timely basis. "We've met with them all and laid out our expectations. We won't tolerate a repeat of that," he said, noting that freeze cycles plus the heavy truck traffic added up to countless damaged roads.