

Van Drew says no notice came regarding Parkway fencing



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Part of a \$7 million project funded by the federal Department of Homeland Security, the new fence being installed from the Somers Point Toll Booth and the Great Egg Harbor Bay Bridge into Upper Township along the Garden State Parkway isn't yet finished but it's already attracting a lot of attention.

The fence is designed to keep terrorists away from bridges, according to the New Jersey Turnpike Authority. Some 80,000 linear feet of security fencing is being installed under or around 10 major bridges on the New Jersey Turnpike and the Garden State Parkway.

The fence posts were put in parallel to the Parkway a few weeks ago. The New Jersey Turnpike Authority plans to install rolls of fencing in front of the posts.

"We have been barraged with questions," said State Sen. Jeff Van Drew. "People have valid questions and concerns."

The fencing arrives in the wake of a clear-cutting plan for trees alongside the Parkway and in the median from Exit 30 to Exit 63.

The Turnpike Authority had conflicting explanations for the unpopular tree-cutting project. First it was due to safety concerns and then it was part of a road widening project for the Parkway, but the third phase of the project was said to be years from completion.

Van Drew said the fencing, like the tree cutting, is adversely affecting the Parkway's aesthetics.

"People love the Parkway, a lot of people travel it constantly," said Van Drew. "I have to speak to officials with the Turnpike Authority. Like the tree-cutting, there was no public notice. People would like to be notified and they would like to have input."

Van Drew said he too has questions concerning the fencing.

"Everyone wants to be protected from terrorism," he said. "We have been told by the Turnpike Authority that we need the fence and that the Y on the top is to keep someone from scaling the fence. I have questions about that. It seems to me that someone willing to cause that kind of damage, terrorism, could find the right tool to cut the fence so is the fence necessary and is it

serving any purpose? My hope is that there is some sort of wisdom in this.”

Van Drew said state legislators had no voice in the fencing. It was not a state expenditure that they could vote to appropriate funding for.

“It was federal funding, through Homeland Security; it’s all taxpayer money,” he said. “Could it have been better utilized somewhere else? Was it the best use of taxpayer dollars?”

Van Drew said the fences are a big distraction from the scenery.

“It’s not as bucolic in North Jersey, maybe there was no question up there,” he said. “Here we have a view of the bay and the marsh.”

“They’re installing the fences on all of the major bridges along the Turnpike and the Parkway,” he said. “We had no idea this was going to happen, no heads up. I would like that to change, so they have to notify us when they do things like this.”

Van Drew said the Turnpike Authority came through after promising a public meeting concerning the controversial tree-cutting.

“They came down, they brought about 10 people, they had engineers and graphics and they talked about the widening project,” he said. “First of all, it’s not going to happen in Cape May County, there will be no more tree clearing. I believe that they are going to move the widening project along a little more quickly than we thought. They maintain that was the original purpose, because the roadway widening project was moving along. They said it was more expensive to cut the trees one section at a time and they got a better price to do it all at one time.”

Van Drew said he has found over the years that people are far more accepting of things they don’t necessarily welcome if they are allowed to express their concerns and ask questions.

“Whether you agree or not, it’s more of a public process when these projects take place if they explain the project first and allow people to ask questions,” he said. “That way if you disagree with a project you have a chance to express your concerns and you may change their minds. The least they can do is make us aware of what’s coming.”
