



MERCER COUNTY ENGINEER

James (Jim) A. Wiechart, P.E., P.S. Engineer

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Mercer County: Rich in History and a Leader in Agriculture

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Engineer Tech II Surveyor
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Tech/Drainage Deputy
AARON MOELLER
AARON SCHAMP
Administrative Assistant
KAREN HEINRICHS

TO: Chairman Kunze, VC Reineke, Ranking Minority Member Antonio
Transportation Committee Members
FROM: *James A. Wiechart, Mercer County Engineer, P.E., P.S.*
DATE: March 19, 2021
RE: **Sub HB 74, Transportation Budget**
FORCE ACCOUNT limits increase - SUPPORT
County: *Mercer*
Budget: *\$12,203,447.62*

I am writing to express my support for Sub. House Bill 74, the Transportation Budget, particularly the addition of the language increasing county and other local government force account limits.

Please accept my testimony related to the Force Account limit increase in Sub HB74. Since it has not been changed since 2003 and natural inflation has diminished, the ability of our crews to complete certain types of improvements, the adjustment of these arbitrary limits is long overdue.

I have served as Mercer County Engineer since 2002 and over that period of time, we have experienced a trend where we have contracted more activities, not because of the limits of the law required it, but because the activities were the best value buy to our constituents. When I took office in 2002, we had a crane, a small paver and a vegetation spray vehicle. All of these pieces of equipment were sold because we did not use them enough to be efficient. Contractors provide better value in certain activities than we ourselves can provide. If the Force Account limits change because of this bill, our position on those aforementioned activities will not change. We will not buy a crane, a paver, or a plethora of new equipment. We will not fog seal roads because there are certain activities that make no financial sense for us to involve ourselves in. We are value shoppers and we frame our purchase decisions through the prism of what provides the best value.

With the current limits in place, we are bumping against those limits with some of our activities. As slower times (ex. Winter, when not plowing) of the year, we cast our own reinforced concrete beams for bridges. On some of these projects, the current limits are impacting and stopping our crews from doing improvements. Imagine that – laws that go contrary to building something and doing work. On the road side of our operations, there are certain road widening activities we could have done, but again, we are bumping against the arbitrary limits.

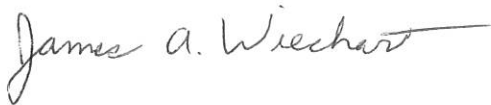
There are certain projects that are above the current force account limits, but not big enough or profitable enough for a contractor to bid a job.

Further, our crews answer to me directly and produce high quality work. Contract crews answer to their boss and our office indirectly. For smaller to mid-size projects, there is an added plan detail - contract bid process cost - that the public experiences when these smaller projects are forced to be contracted out. Allowing contractors to continue to build the intermediate and larger projects, while we focus on the smaller ones, makes good sense. There are certain activities below the cost of the existing and proposed limits we will and would continue to contract out.

However, there are some project and work types that make us less efficient because of the current state of the law. The change in the law would remedy this problem.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important issue that directly affects the ability of this office to get certain types of work done.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James A. Wiechart". The signature is written in black ink and has a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.

James A. Wiechart, P.E., P.S.
Mercer County Engineer

JAW/kh