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Testimony Prepared for the Pennsylvania Senate Transportation Committee Meeting

October 1, 2024

Re: Testimony for Hearing on Optimizing PA's Multimodal Transportation System (Part II)

Chair Langerholc and Members of the Transportation Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today as you consider potential funding strategies for Pennsylvania's transportation systems. At a time when leaders in Harrisburg are debating the best way to provide sustainable, long-term funding for critical public transit services, we are pleased to offer our insight into some of the innovative public transportation solutions that we are operating in the Keystone state in partnership with public transit agencies. These solutions play an important role in boosting ridership, improving efficiencies, and lowering costs in urban, suburban, and rural communities. We therefore encourage you to include funding for on-demand transit explicitly as part of the larger transit funding package currently under discussion. This will enable Pennsylvania localities and transit agencies to launch new, innovative transportation services across the state and provide access to jobs, health care, and essential services for Pennsylvania residents who have no other mobility solutions - all while increasing ridership, improving efficiency, and lowering costs.

About Via

Via is a transit technology company that works with more than 750 transit agencies and municipalities around the world to deliver innovative, equitable, and sustainable public transportation solutions. This includes deploying on-demand transit shuttles (also referred to as "microtransit"), making fixed route bus networks more efficient, improving paratransit operations and non-emergency medical travel options, and providing parents real-time school bus information. We believe transit is the lifeblood of communities, and that leveraging innovation in transportation will help provide accessible, sustainable, and reliable mobility for all.

Many municipalities and transit agencies have turned to on-demand transit as a way to provide more flexible and adaptable service to fill gaps where fixed route rail and bus service does not exist, or to boost ridership on fixed route transit by offering first and last mile transit services. With on-demand transit, the rides are shared; the routes are nimble and change in real-time based on rider demand; the vehicles range in size from vans to mini buses; and riders can request a ride by phone or using a mobile app.

Accessibility and equity are core aspects of on-demand transit services - our goal is to reach every rider possible, particularly vulnerable populations who need these transportation services the most. We provide wheelchair accessible vehicles and accessible mobile applications; alternative payment options for unbanked riders; a phone call option for those who do not have or cannot use a smartphone; and we provide app and phone based support in over 20 languages.

On-demand transit in Pennsylvania

In Pennsylvania, Via partners to provide on-demand transit with Rabbittransit (Susquehanna Regional Transportation Authority), Centre Area Transportation Authority (CATA), and we will soon be launching with Luzerne County Transportation Authority.

With the tap of a smartphone or by calling a phone number, residents and visitors in these communities can summon a transit shuttle van and within a few minutes take a ride to anywhere in the service zone for similar fares to traditional fixed-route buses. The results have been transformative for riders, with over 10,000 riders using Rabbittransit's Stop Hopper each year to travel across zones in specific parts of York, Snyder, Northumberland, Columbia, Montour, Snyder and Union Counties. Trips on Stop Hopper at just \$2, and are free for seniors. And residents have spoken loud and clear in support - the Stop Hopper app has a 4.9 out of 5 rating on the Apple App Store.

Via's partnership with CATA has given residents greater access to the fixed-route bus network through CATAGO!, a microtransit service that operates in a number of zones in neighborhoods outside of downtown State College, allowing access to important community hubs such as schools, grocery stores, and healthcare facilities. For those making trips downtown, riders are connected to fixed-route bus stops in the zone, helping to boost ridership on the system as a whole while keeping costs low. Since launch, CATAGO has provided over 250,000 rides and averages over 6,000 rides per month.

Additionally, Via partners with SEPTA to provide the agency transit planning software support. All of these services demonstrate that these transportation solutions have applications in a variety of settings and can fulfill a broad range of policy goals.

House Bill 2505 21-22 and Other Potential Funding Models

Turning to the discussion at hand, we understand that on-demand transit and innovative mobility is a small part of the larger discussion surrounding transit. However, we have spoken to communities across the state who are seeking to establish on-demand transit services, but do not have the funding to pilot or launch these services, and we think there is a role for microtransit to play here, particularly regarding improvements in efficiency, cost, and rural access for public transit.

In the 2021-2022 regular session, Rep. Robert Merski introduced House Bill 2505, which would have established the Pennsylvania Microtransit Grant Program and appropriated \$25 million for transit agencies, counties, and municipalities to apply for. Since then, nearby states including Connecticut, New York, and Massachusetts have established their own state grants with similar dollar amounts to provide funding and support for on-demand transit and other forms of innovative mobility. By providing funding for the deployment of on-demand transit as part of a larger transit funding package, Pennsylvania will encourage localities and transit agencies to launch new, innovative transportation services across the state and enable access to jobs, health care, and essential services for Pennsylvania residents who have no other mobility solutions.

Legislators across the country are recognizing innovative solutions like on-demand transit as an essential part of transportation funding, particularly with the federal government's bipartisan infrastructure law inclusion of funding for on-demand transit services in new and existing grant programs, provided a matching state or local funding source is available. We urge the General Assembly to do the same, which would leverage these federal funds and provide critical funding for on-demand transit services.

Thank you for your efforts toward advancing public transportation for Pennsylvania residents.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Tillunger, Principal, Policy & Government Affairs