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Senate Transportation Committee

Optimizing Pennsylvania's Multimodal Transportation System (Part II)

Transit For All PA! Testimony

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Introduction

Hello to Chair, Senator Wayne Langerholc; Minority Chair, Senator Marty Flynn; the Senate Transportation Committee; gathered transit agencies; and the public. My name is Connor Descheemaker, and I am speaking today as a co-convenor of the statewide Transit For All PA campaign. Our campaign works alongside transit riders, operator unions, and community-based organizations who recognize the foundational role of reliable public transportation in all 67 counties in the Commonwealth. I also serve as the Coalition Manager of Transit Forward Philadelphia, representing over 30 neighborhood associations and CDCs, environmental justice organizations, immigrant and refugee-support groups, elder- and disabled-rights groups, and others advocating for affordable, accessible, and reliable public transportation in southeastern Pennsylvania.

Thank you to the committee for convening this hearing, recognizing the urgency of finding meaningful, stable funding solutions for our transportation systems. In particular, I'd like to thank Senator Flynn for his recent Memorandum proposing an increase in the state sales tax allocation to the Public Transportation Trust Fund.

While the coalition I represent today is diverse in race, gender, ability, and the rural, urban and suburban communities in which we reside, we are united in recognizing the power of transit in providing access to economic opportunity, education, healthcare, community connection, and efficiency and sustainability to all. This week, we're even celebrating Week Without Driving - a nationwide movement to draw attention to when driving isn't a "choice" and transit is the primary or only option. We're grateful to the elected officials, residents, and community based organizations participating alongside us. Does this body realize this is the reality of 30% of Pennsylvanians?

Today though, we are asking the Senate Transportation Committee to work with leadership and Governor Shapiro to imminently advance legislation that will provide sustainable and reliable operations funding for public transportation, while working to secure significant capital investments in the years to come. Transit agencies across the state are in crisis, and only weeks remain before service cuts and fare increases begin to commence with large agencies, while many more will make permanent what was thought to be temporary reductions in service.

Though I reside in southeastern Pennsylvania, we must remember that while transit is trains, trolleys, and buses in urban places to most, it is fixed-route service in State College, the incline in Johnstown, and shared-ride in even the smallest rural county. Public transportation affects us all.

Operating Funds

As this body knows well, Pennsylvania's main funding bill, Act 89, for transit ended in 2022. And before this body and at a statewide tour of the House Transportation Committee, Secretary Carroll testified alongside chambers of commerce, agencies, riders, and advocates to the dire position our transit agencies find themselves in. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have permanently altered our transportation patterns in cities of all sizes. While the federal government provided crucial emergency relief funds for the last few years, this money ran out in April, with SEPTA specifically running a \$240million operating deficit - and passing a budget on the promise of the PA legislature providing needed funds while still dipping into reserves and cutting costs.

While funding from the state government has remained stagnant for over a decade, agencies continued to deal with cost increases in their own ways. For Pittsburgh Regional Transit, that meant cumulative service cuts of 40% over 20 years. For rural systems, that meant cuts to the bone in frequency and the complete loss of PennDOT-supported intercity connections in 21 communities. SEPTA, for its part, has only marginally cut service due to challenges with operator hiring, which is the reason its deficit is greatest. Through the duration of these cuts and adaptations, the number of non-drivers in Pennsylvania has only increased yet our funding streams ignore their - our - needs.

This year, Governor Shapiro proposed (and last year, the PA House passed) an increase in the state sales tax allocation to the Public Transportation Trust Fund - a conservative measure by any estimation, while states like New Jersey, New York, California, Minnesota, and others drastically change funding streams and raise taxes to stave off service collapse. While waiting for the legislature to act, PRT is initiating a bus network redesign, smaller systems are shifting resources between micromobility and fixed-route service as well as pursuing partnerships with anchor institutions. And SEPTA has moved to increase its own fares while moving ahead on long-planned service enhancements like Reimagining Regional Rail and the New Bus Network, all designed to attract new riders to the system.

In response to rider feedback and the continued expressions of the legislature and other elected leaders, SEPTA passed Operating and Capital budgets with significant increases in funding under a new "Safe, Clean & Secure" section - including \$36million for vacuum trains and \$33million for a Cleaning Equipment Storage facility. SEPTA also hired dozens more cleaning staff, and in the last few months reached the full budgeted complement of transit police, leading to an over 30% decrease in violent crime year over year. All the while, its nationally-acclaimed SCOPE program has made over 80,000 touches and system removals to unhoused riders and/or those suffering from addiction. SEPTA is not a social service agency, yet it is taking initiative to deal with issues manifest in the community at-large, which affect their system.

By providing these crucial operating dollars, our transit agencies can focus their energies on adapting to our new travel patterns - with returning (and even growing!) ridership during weekday afternoons,

evenings, and weekends. Transit isn't just for 9-to-5 commuting; it's also for accessing major events like the recent Taylor Swift and Beyonce concerts or Eagles football games, traveling to essential medical appointments, visiting family across the metro area, and increasing accessibility for our elders and disabled community members. In 2026 alone, Pennsylvania will play host to an All-Star Game, the NFL draft, the FIFA World Cup, and the Semisesquicentennial celebrations - all attracting a truly-global audience which simply cannot be accommodated by our roads and bridges.

In survey after survey, transit riders agree: frequent and reliable service is the most important factor in use of public transit. And ridership is returning! Just this month, SEPTA reached 80% of pre-pandemic service levels on regional rail due to increased operator hiring after lingering struggles, and overall ridership hit nearly 640,000 daily boardings: hundreds of thousands of more trips than on I-95 in a given day and up 19% from the previous August. This body acted with local and federal partners to take urgent action upon I-95's collapse, but before the onset of the pandemic, the Market-Frankford Line alone carried more daily passengers than I-95, yet the system has benefitted from neither the urgency nor attention of the highway.

If the legislature does not deliver, transit agencies will make further cuts. This is something that's just a matter of practice. But what about the riders? For over 60% of those that ride public transportation, it is their only option. Without service, we lose our jobs, our healthcare declines, we drop out of school, and we lose all of the connections and opportunities that go along with them. The legislature and governor will be responsible for defeating ourselves. While agencies and riders continue to make sacrifices and adapt, what will the legislature do to support this foundational public service?

Capital Funding

Similarly, with the arrival of the federal Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act (IIJA) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), our commonwealth is primed for unprecedented capital investment in our transit systems. But as it currently stands, Pennsylvania's cities and counties can't even qualify for a variety of federal funding streams due to a lack of local matching dollars and a state preemption from raising them through dedicated money.

Ohio, Arizona, Washington, and Colorado. States disparate in geography, politics, and population, but all more competitive than Pennsylvania because they allow local governments to raise local, dedicated capital money for transportation projects. Legislation like HB 1307 and HB 902 provides a path; we simply need the House and Senate to commit to taking it. Every day our commonwealth delays, we miss out on the 5-to-1 return on investment transit projects provide, and we miss out on infrastructure dollars going to other states from these federal pots.

With local enabling legislation, we can turn our attention to ambitious, popular projects like the East Busway expansion in Allegheny County, the return of the Reading intercity train line, and the century-in-waiting Roosevelt Boulevard Subway. And we can finally make good on the promise of the Americans With Disabilities Act by making all public transportation fully accessible - a particular weakness in our trolley system in southeastern Pennsylvania, whose modernization remains unfunded to the tune of \$1 billion.

Policy Recommendations

Today, I arrive with solutions: In 2021, the Transit for All PA! Coalition was born out of statewide grassroots canvassing and organizing efforts, with particular emphasis in State College, Scranton, Lancaster, Harrisburg and Philadelphia. The transit workers and riders in these communities collaborated on multiple statewide Zoom calls of over 100 participants each to develop a grassroots, equity-centered platform of state transit funding mechanisms and legislative outcomes. This platform and the values at the heart of the Transit for All PA! Coalition demonstrates the commitment to transit riders and workers as experts in identifying the barriers to mobility in our communities, and the solutions that will be most effective at removing those barriers. Since the platform was developed, over 50 local and statewide organizations, more than 25 legislators, and thousands of individuals have signed on in support. Much of this platform was elevated and adopted into Governor Wolf's Transportation Revenue Options Commission report - and one of my co-convenors participated.

Our platform calls for transportation funding to adhere to the following principles:

1. **To serve Pennsylvania's diverse needs.** In recognition of our rural, suburban, and urban systems covering every county. This is not just about SEPTA and PRT.
2. **Through progressive mechanisms.** To ensure funding according to ability.
3. **With sustainable, long-term funding sources.** To allow long-term planning and modern purchasing, something we hear repeatedly from rural and suburban agencies.
4. **Equitably with roads and bridges.** Focusing on fix-it-first with highway funding to think responsibly, recognizing the enormous economic benefits of transit.
5. **With transit riders and transit workers at the table.** To center the experience of those who use these systems daily, like me.
6. **Without inflicting harm or funding reductions to other essential state services and programs.** We should be working from a place of scarcity, but abundance in ensuring we can maximize the impact of our transportation systems.

We additionally affirm the National Campaign for Transit Justice Principles, which calls for transit to be:

- Equitable
- Sustainable
- Economically productive
- Safe and accessible
- Affordable

To generate these funds, we support general reforms to the tax code to make revenue streams into the PA General Fund more equitable, including implementing the Fair Share tax and closing the Delaware loophole. We remain hopeful about the gradual removal of the PA State Police from the Motor Vehicle License Fund.

From speaking with these riders, workers, and advocates, we developed these long-term funding mechanisms we collectively support:

Corporate Income Tax Increase: An increase on the tax on the profits of a PA corporation

Implementation of a Corporate Head Tax: Implementation of a flat fee charged per employee for businesses over a certain size

Wealth Tax: Implementation of a tax on the net wealth a Pennsylvania resident holds, for those with total wealth over several million dollars

TNC Fee: A per ride tax on any Transportation Network Company (TNC) company trip like Uber or Lyft

Interstate Tolling: A statewide toll of interstates and expressways

Mileage-Based User Fees: This new road user charge will charge 3.16 cents to 7 cents per mile. Recognizing the declining value of the gas tax, and increased wear on our roads from heavier electric vehicles.

Excise Tax on Vehicle Delivery: This is a percentage of value on goods delivered from third-party delivery companies, like Amazon

Increase to Truck and Tractor-trailer Registration Fees: These fees will be tacked on heavy-duty trucks and tractor-trailers registered in the state of Pennsylvania

Vehicle Property Tax: This is a percentage fee on the assessed value of a vehicle (or .35% of the annual value)

New Car Vehicle Sales Tax: This will increase in the current vehicle sales tax to address the Act 44/89 sunset in 2022

Luxury Vehicle Tax: This is a tax on all of the luxury vehicles sold and registered in the state of Pennsylvania

Vehicle Rental Tax: This is an increase on a tax on all vehicle rentals made in the state of Pennsylvania.

Conclusion

Thank you to the Senate Transportation Committee for this timely hearing. We are eager to see this body act with purpose and urgency to solve the operations funding crisis before it's too late, and agencies are forced to reduce service and raise fares further than already proposed. Or in the case of systems like Pittsburgh Regional Transit, simply make permanent what they have already done over the last two decades. If we do not act, we will kneecap the entire commonwealth. We will worsen health

outcomes by reducing shared-ride service in every county; we will worsen pollution and congestion by reducing transportation options; we will worsen economic activity by limiting job access; we will worsen the crises of social participation among the disabled, youth, and the elderly by taking away transportation options when they cannot drive by necessity. And we will embarrass ourselves on the world stage by degrading our transportation network at the kinds of "peak need" by which we develop our road and highway and parking projections.

The Pennsylvania legislature can still act to prevent these outcomes. It can come together to solve the immediate operating crisis, while laying the foundation for future capital investments to stimulate manufacturing jobs across the commonwealth alongside economic activity in the locations where these projects will be built.

In our organizing, we have talked to riders and advocates from Coatesville to Scranton, Wilkes-Barre to Allentown, Lewisburg to Carlisle, Bucks County to Westmoreland County. All of them see public transportation as essential to their daily lives, or see its future as a fount of opportunity and participation in our Commonwealth. Traffic jams cost our nation \$81 billion per year in lost economic activity. We know that public transportation helps drivers, too, by reducing congestion and making our streets safer. In southeastern Pennsylvania, we already have a system that today would cost \$150-200 billion to build from scratch. We just need to afford to run service on it. While in Johnstown we're restoring service to the incline, demand shifts amongst students in State College, and Reading and Scranton and Pottstown work together to restore connections to Philadelphia. We can do this, but there must be will and urgency.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. We have a tremendous opportunity to capitalize on federal dollars and keep stable our fragile economic recovery in the wake of the pandemic. We look forward to the actions of Chair, Senator Wayne Langerholc; Chair, Senator Marty Flynn; and the remainder of the Senate Transportation Committee.