

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION TESTIMONY

PennDOT Districts 2 & 3

**Cameron; Centre; Clearfield; Clinton; Elk; Juniata; McKean; Mifflin; Potter;
Bradford; Columbia; Lycoming; Montour; Montour; Northumberland; Snyder; Sullivan; Tioga; Union
June 1, 2010
Lock Haven, PA**

Thank you for hosting this hearing today. My name is Cynthia Zerbe and I am administrator of USTA, the Union-Snyder Transportation Alliance. I am a board member of the Pennsylvania Public Transportation Association and I am offering remarks on behalf of the thirteen transportation providers who serve the 18 predominantly rural counties in PennDOT Districts 2 & 3. Public transportation is offered in each of the 67 counties in Pennsylvania. Many of our citizens depend upon the mobility services we provide to allow them the freedom to be employed, attend school, access medical care, shop in our retail centers, and enjoy the quality of life each of your constituents deserves.

From the fixed route services provided by River Valley Transit in Williamsport and CATA in State College, to the Area Transportation Authority of North Central Pennsylvania with a service area encompassing six rural counties, to the other rural providers of DuFAST, Endless Mountains and Mount Carmel Transit, to the shared ride programs of Centre, Montour, and Northumberland Counties, STEP in Lycoming County, Call-a Ride in Mifflin and Juniata Counties and USTA, we carry more than eight million riders each year and employ more than 500 people

Community Transportation, also known as Class 5 Shared-Ride Transportation is a vital service in the rural communities of Pennsylvania, providing service for a very dependent population. It is a lifeline to services and often the difference between a person continuing to live in their home or moving to a nursing home, being on disability or gainfully employed.

In Montour County Melissa Wilson, a 27 year old mother of three, was paralyzed in a motor vehicle accident. She relies upon the shared-ride program to allow her the mobility she needs for medical appointments. The transit system also informed her of other county services that would help her through this challenging life change. DuFAST and ATA transport 20% of the employees of the Goodwill Industries of North Central PA. With more than 425 workers, Goodwill and their employees know the value of public transportation. STEP in Lycoming County consistently hears that their riders would be forced into assisted living and lose their independence if it wasn't for the service they provide. Stories like these can be told by every

transportation provider in the Commonwealth. We need our legislators to understand the benefits of public transportation and how vital service is in all parts of our state.

As noted in the Transportation and Reform Commission's Executive Summary, Community Transportation Shared-Ride has its own patchwork quilt of funding and program requirements. Open to the general public, full fare rates are so prohibitive that virtually no individual can afford a trip without qualifying for specific program sponsorship. Commonwealth programs, such as the Shared-Ride Program for Older Adults and Persons with Disabilities and the Medical Assistance Transportation Program support access to transportation to those who meet program criteria.

As fares increase, many other programs operating on fixed budgets can afford fewer trips for clients, resulting in a lack of access to services. But a fare increase is the only alternative for shared ride providers because there is no source of fixed operating revenue available. When there are unexpected changes in ridership, revenue takes an immediate dive but fixed expenses remain the same. When operating costs increase because of spikes in fuel or insurance costs, our revenue cannot meet expenses. Agencies live on a shoestring, trying hard to keep fares affordable to riders and local agencies. All providers have limited reserves on which to fall back upon when unexpected spikes in costs occur.

The Commission recommended that the Commonwealth evaluate community transportation to improve efficiency and productivity, to expand service for Programs of Statewide Significance and to create a Service Stabilization program for community transportation. With the implementation of Act 44, the Shared-Ride Program for Persons with Disabilities (PwD) has expanded to every county in the state. Union and Snyder counties have seen the demand for this program expand and PwD ridership now accounts for 10% of the total trips USTA provides, 50% of which are employment related. USTA rider Gary Jarrett, blind since his teens, travels with USTA daily to reach his job. His neighbor had been transporting him for several years, but became unemployed due to layoffs at the factory at which she worked. USTA stepped in and our service gives him the opportunity to remain gainfully employed.

Because of Act 44, shared-ride systems had the opportunity to apply for Service Stabilization funds, which have been used in various ways. Many systems were able to use funds to stabilize budgets when gas prices sky rocketed. Some used the funds to upgrade their technology to improve efficiency with the purchase of GPS tracking units, software, or

communication systems. Some replaced vehicles to increase the safety of their fleets and reduce the amount of maintenance required. All these things have a positive impact on system operations. To continue the Service Stabilization Program, providers need a form of fixed revenue, similar to asset maintenance dollars that fixed route transit providers receive. We must assure that the safety and efficiency of public transportation continues to improve and does not deteriorate.

The reason people come to work for Community Transportation providers is because they like what they do, which is to help people. The work is meaningful but wages are low. In many systems, employer paid health insurance is only available to full-time employees, and usually not to their families. In some counties, the directors of the systems are called upon to drive the bus or even change a tire. Because of limited staff and limited funds, management is often involved in the day-to-day front line operations, leaving little opportunity for planning, outreach to the community, or developing partnerships. Continuation of Service Stabilization funding is needed to assist providers with strategic planning so that providers can look at ways in which to improve services and efficiencies, cover fixed operational expenses due to loss of ridership revenue during harsh winters, and allow providers to hold the line on fares that are a burden to our riders and local agencies.

While my comments have focused on community transportation, our state's fixed route providers also face challenges. Many are planning fare increases and evaluating service reductions. CATA in State College expects a fare increase will be necessary in August, and even though their community bus service has been growing nearly 10% annually, they are unable to meet the service demands. If they must begin service reductions, their busiest corridors will experience even more overcrowding, to the point of passing riders because the bus is filled to capacity.

With adequate funding, CATA could operate fewer "crush capacity" buses by increasing the number of runs on their busiest corridors. They could extend their service to meet the demands in the ever developing areas at the periphery of the community. And with additional capital funding they could expand their severely overcrowded maintenance facility, advance their transit technology initiative and complete their bus fleet restoration program. This is just one example of the needs, but more importantly the opportunities confronting many of our transit systems.

Now is the time to assure the growth of public transportation to enhance the quality of life, the safety of the environment, and the development of businesses all across the Commonwealth. We are at a crossroad where we can continue the leadership of our state by creating a comprehensive transportation program that provides adequate, dedicated, predictable and growing support. We lead the nation in so many ways. We must again take charge of this opportunity to assure the mobility and safety of all citizens of the Commonwealth.

On behalf of public transportation providers all across the state, thank you for hosting these hearings. We, as an industry, stand ready to actively support your efforts to provide a transportation program worthy of the citizens we serve.

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Union/Snyder Transportation Alliance

Written Testimony – Districts 2 & 3, Lock Haven

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Community Transportation, also known as Class 5 Shared-Ride Transportation is a vital service in the rural communities of Pennsylvania, providing service for a very dependent population. It is a lifeline to services and often the difference between a person continuing to live in their home or moving to a nursing home, being on disability or gainfully employed. As noted in the Transportation and Reform Commission's Executive Summary, Community Transportation Shared-Ride has its own patchwork quilt of funding and program requirements.

Service is available in all Commonwealth Counties and open to the general public however, full fare rates are so prohibitive that virtually no individual can afford a trip without program sponsorship and as fares increase, programs operating on fixed budgets can afford fewer trips for clients, resulting in lack of access to services. In the rural counties of the SEDA-Cog region, transportation services are primarily available only to those that qualify for specific Commonwealth sponsored programs such as the Shared-Ride Programs for Older Adults and Persons with Disabilities and the Medical Assistance Transportation Programs.

There are those that believe that the current shared-ride program meets most of the transportation needs in our region, however, a recent study completed by the Greater Susquehanna Valley United Way identified limited transportation as a barrier for individuals of all ages, including youth. As a result of this study the United Way has formed a Taskforce that includes leaders from local medical facilities, universities, human service agencies and governmental entities in an effort to assess transportation needs regionally. The mission statement of the Taskforce is as follows: *"To achieve a regional system that addresses public transportation needs so that area residents can better access employment, educational, medical and social services within the North Central Pennsylvania region in an efficient and cost effective manner."* The Taskforce is a recipient of a PDOT grant that has local matching fund contributions from several counties to complete a regional public transportation needs assessment.

The Commission recommended that the Commonwealth evaluate community transportation to improve efficiency and productivity of public and human service transportation through the coordination of service and funding for long-term stability, stabilize and expand service for Programs of Statewide Significance and create a Service Stabilization program for community transportation services.

There have been strides made as it relates to Community Transportation since the implementation of Act 44. The Shared-Ride Program for Persons with Disabilities is being expanded statewide. USTA implemented this program in 2003 and PwD ridership now accounts for 10% of the total trips provided, 50% of which have been employment related. Agencies had opportunities to apply for Service Stabilization funds for the first time. The condition of agency fleets has been greatly improved over the past three years, which positively impacts agencies operationally. We hope a way can be found to not let the fleets deteriorate.

A Human Services Coordination Study has been completed and providers are working towards a higher level of coordination. PDOT asked for pilot coordination projects to be submitted and a proposal to better coordinate longer distance out of county services was submitted by the SEDA-Cog region. Although the proposal was not chosen to be a primary candidate we are pleased to learn that consideration is being given to provide the applicants with technical assistance in an effort to develop the proposal. It will be several years until the pilot results are available and during the interim providers will continue to make efforts to coordinate better with their partners, manage costs and monitor productivity.

Coordination of service is desirable in the rural counties as it is a cost effective way in which to provide service, however, there is a gap in operating funds for Community Transportation providers. There is no source of fixed revenue available as a base. When there are unexpected changes in ridership, revenue takes an immediate dive but fixed expenses remain the same. Agencies live on a shoestring, trying hard to keep fares affordable to riders and local agencies and generally have limited reserves on which to fall back on when unexpected spikes in costs occur.

There is still a major concern about the need for Community Transportation providers to have available to them a form of fixed revenue, similar to asset maintenance dollars that mass transit providers receive. Service Stabilization funds have been used in various ways statewide. In USTA's case, funds enabled USTA to hold off a fare increase for an additional year without incurring a

significant deficit. Other systems used the funding for a variety of projects in an effort to make program improvements. The funds were used for GPS Tracking units, training programs, marketing, software, communication systems. I believe finding a way to fund a continuation of the Service Stabilization Program should be considered.

The reason people come to work for Community Transportation providers is because they like what they do, which is to help people. The work is meaningful unfortunately, wages are generally low. In USTA's case agency paid health insurance is only available to full-time employees, not their families. In some counties, the directors of the agencies are sometimes called upon to drive the bus. There is little opportunity for administrative staff to plan, outreach to the community, develop partnerships because the staffing is so tight that management is often involved in day-to-day operations more than is ideal.

Continuation of Service Stabilization funding could be used to assist providers with strategic planning so that providers can look at ways in which to improve services and efficiencies, cover fixed operational expenses due to loss of ridership revenue during harsh winters, and allow providers to hold the line on fares that are a burden to our riders and local agencies.

All public transportation funding, including local support must be adequate, dedicated, predictable and growing sources of funding not subject to fluctuations. Relatively speaking, the small systems are just as valuable to our communities as the large systems are to their communities.

Please continue to include Community Transportation services in your funding considerations.

Union/Snyder Transportation Alliance

Rider Story

Gary L. Jarrett, Milton Pennsylvania

1 (570) 742-1482

Mr. Jarrett is 50 years old and has been blind since the age of 16. He learned how to work on cars as a young teenager. Mr. Jarrett is a Northumberland County resident and has been employed by Premier Automotive in Mifflinburg, Union County as a mechanic for 12 years. For many years a neighbor that worked at Wood-Mode in Mifflinburg transported Mr. Jarrett to/from work. That individual had worked at Wood-Mode for 22 years, however, due to the downturn in the economy lost her job, leaving him to count on family and friends for transportation. Due to obligations of family and friends, provision of his transportation became a problem, leaving him at risk of losing his job.

Mr. Jarrett contacted Northumberland County seeking transportation. Because his schedule did not fit well with Northumberland County's routes, and because Northumberland County and Union/Snyder Counties have been working in a cooperative effort, Northumberland County contacted USTA's PwD Program Manager to see if USTA could provide the rides.

Mr. Jarrett has been riding the USTA bus to/from his full-time job Monday through Friday since January, 2010. He says he is very grateful to have USTA's transportation; he feels he could not stand sitting at home all day and is thankful to be employed.