

Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Transportation Committee & Policy Committee

Public Hearing

Financial Needs to Maintain Pennsylvania's Highway, Bridge

&

Public Transportation Systems

Thursday, June 10, 2010



Submitted by:
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Executive Director
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Good afternoon. Thank you for hosting this hearing today. My name is Bob Fiume and I am the Executive Director of COLTS, the transit system that serves Lackawanna County. I am speaking on behalf of the three urban systems and the six shared-ride providers in PennDOT District 4. Together, we carry more than five million riders throughout a six-county area. We represent the typical public transportation system that is in place in all 67 counties of the state and we're here today to discuss why we need the members of the General Assembly to invest in a comprehensive transportation plan. Inaction will result in a failing transportation system that would have dire economic and social consequences on the citizens of Pennsylvania.

The County of Lackawanna Transit System (COLTS) is the principal provider of transportation services in Lackawanna County. COLTS operates 29 fixed routes, as well as an evening shuttle service geared toward second- and third-shift workers. More than 1.9 million people rode COLTS last year for work, shopping, school, doctor's appointments, social services, and other life-sustaining needs. COLTS also provides paratransit service to more than 10,000 people annually through the Lackawanna County Coordinated Transportation System.

Luzerne County Transportation Authority (LCTA) has 16 fixed routes and carried 1.6 million riders in 2009. LCTA's paratransit ridership is 21,000. Hazleton Public Transit (HPT) carried nearly 237,000 riders on its eight fixed routes last year. HPT provides paratransit service to 10,000 people each year.

All of our systems have a positive impact on the economy of our region. We help revitalize business districts. We bring employers and employees together. We purchase millions of dollars in products and services from Pennsylvania businesses. Together, COLTS, LCTA and HPT employ more than 200 people. We contribute to the growth and development of the counties we serve by providing more than a ride. We are part of the economic engine that drives our counties and the Commonwealth.

The majority of riders in our three systems are senior citizens who rely on public transit as their sole means of transportation. Carbondale senior Mary Barnhart, who depends on COLTS to take her to her doctor, would be "stranded" without public transit. Beaver Meadows resident Pat Rayno, a 70-year-old widow, would have no way of getting to the grocery store or pharmacy without HPT.

About 10 to 12 percent of the riders in each of our systems use public transit to get to work – riders like West Wyoming resident Rita McCrea, who would be unable to get to her job or to visit her mother in a Scranton nursing home without LCTA and COLTS. Billie Harvilla, who has worked with a foster grandparent program for nearly 18 years, would not be able to work without HPT.

Many people rely on public transit for everything they do. Scranton resident Kaneda Gethers, a single mom, cannot afford a car and relies on COLTS to get her to work, to take her son to school, and to go grocery shopping.

Many of our riders take the bus because their disabilities prevent them from driving. Carol Gill is a loyal rider who is unable to drive because she has epilepsy. She depends on the bus as her

main source of transportation for doctor's appointments, hospital visits, running errands, shopping, and many other day-to-day activities.

As you can see, public transportation provides an essential service to nearly 4 million people who ride our fixed routes each year. There is simply no alternative for many of these people to do the things they need to do to lead normal lives. In short, cuts to bus service would be devastating to the citizens and to the economy in our region.

Public transit in Pennsylvania has not had an increase in operating funding for the last three years, even as our agencies have had to account for the cost of fuel, health care, and pensions increasing annually higher than the rate of inflation. The promises of Act 44 have gone unfulfilled, which could mean that this law will be remembered as the destruction of public transportation in the Commonwealth.

Although each transit system in the state faces different budget issues, current levels of service provided by all of our systems would be unsustainable at the present level of state funding. There is an operating funding shortfall statewide because of the federal government's rejection of the tolling of I-80 and because of lower revenues from sales tax. We are also affected by a federal rule that eliminates federal operating assistance for transit systems operating in urbanized areas with populations of more than 200,000. Eleven transit systems in the Commonwealth have already been affected by this rule, including COLTS and LCTA.

But this is not simply an operating issue. The capital needs of transit systems continue to go unfunded with a minimum estimated shortfall of at least \$484 million in Fiscal Year 2011.

Planned projects, such as the replacement of diesel buses with hybrid buses, could be in jeopardy. Transit systems across the nation have increasingly become good stewards of the environment by using hybrid buses. LCTA already has hybrid buses in their fleet, and COLTS will add its first four next year. Ideally, our systems would like to have fleets comprised of 100 percent diesel-electric hybrid buses. The purchase of hybrid buses has a positive impact on the environment, and therefore, on the quality of life of all Americans.

As you know, public transportation is one of the solutions to our energy crisis. Just by taking public transportation, people can help reduce our country's dependence on foreign oil, reduce congestion and mitigate travel delays. Air quality is improved because public transportation produces 95 percent less carbon monoxide (CO), 90 percent less in volatile organic compounds (VOCs), and about half as much carbon dioxide (CO₂), and nitrogen oxide (NO_x) per passenger mile as private vehicles.

COLTS, LCTA and HPT are part of a PennDOT study looking at the possibility of regionalizing the three systems and consolidating into one larger system. The potential regionalization of these agencies would provide us with opportunities to expand and improve the quality of our services. Regionalization would allow us to share our many resources and to save money. Riders could easily travel from Scranton to Wilkes-Barre to Hazleton, making public transit an even more appealing prospect for commuters. Everyone talks about doing things with a regional approach, and this pilot project is a real chance to see if such a project is viable. But with transit funding sources that are uncertain, it is a pilot project that may never get off the ground.

With adequate funding, we would be able to expand our services. What does this mean? It means that not only could we expand our fixed routes to reach people in areas that we have not been able to serve, but we could provide more opportunities for people with disabilities. If we expand our fixed routes, our paratransit routes would - by definition - expand.

We would be able to add routes to industrial parks and other employment centers, which would revitalize the economy. In short, if we knew what our future funding sources would be and that they would be stable, there would be many possibilities for more service.

Expanded service could also mean extended service hours, which is one of the requests most often heard from our passengers and from people who would like to take public transit but say the hours are not convenient. With adequate funding, we could also add service on weekends. This is nothing new; bus systems across the state hear these same requests from passengers.

Act 44 was intended to provide dedicated, predictable, and sustainable funding for public transportation. Without the promised investment, the stability in levels of service, fare structures, mobility improvements, state of good repair and necessary capital investment in vehicles and facilities is compromised. Like most transit systems we utilize state funding to provide the required match for federal dollars, so even our federal funding is negatively affected by inadequate state funding.

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 must provide a comprehensive transportation program that provides adequate, dedicated, predictable and growing support. It is critical to the future of Pennsylvania and essential to assure the mobility and safety of our citizens. We cannot stress to you enough the urgency of this problem.

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.

We appreciate your leadership on this issue and are ready to assist you in finding a comprehensive and responsible solution to this crisis.

Sincerely,
Robert J. Fiume
Executive Director
County of Lackawanna Transit System