



September 12, 2023

## **House Transportation Committee - Public Hearing on Challenges With Transit Funding**

Transit Forward Philadelphia Testimony

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### **Introduction**

Hello to Acting Chair, Representative Kyle Mullins and Chair, Representative Ed Neilson; Minority Chair, Representative Kerry Benninghoff; the House Transportation Committee; gathered transit agencies; and the public. My name is Connor Descheemaker, and I am the Coalition Manager of Transit Forward Philadelphia. We are a coalition of 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. We are also one of the convening organizations for the statewide Transit For All PA coalition, acting under a shared mission of reliable, equitable funding for public transportation that serves millions across all 67 counties in the Commonwealth.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today, and discuss opportunities to stabilize and improve funding for transit in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. While our voices and perspectives are diverse in background, rural, urban and suburban, we are united in recognizing the power of transit in providing access to economic opportunity, community connection, and efficiency and sustainability to all.

Today, we are asking the House Transportation Committee to support an increase in the state sales tax allocation for the Public Transportation Trust Fund by just 1.8% for transit agencies' operating expenses. And support the passage of local enabling legislation for local governments to raise matching dollars and access the unprecedented new capital available through the federal government's Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act (IIJA) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA).

### **Operating Funds**

As this body knows well, Pennsylvania's main funding bill, Act 89, for transit ended in 2022. At the same time, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have permanently altered our transportation patterns in cities of all sizes. While the federal government has provided crucial emergency relief funds for the last few years, this money is already running out, with SEPTA specifically facing a projected \$240million operating deficit beginning in FY2025. To even maintain current service levels, this would require major service cuts and fare increases, just as inflation is wracking those most dependent on transit, and our housing crisis continues to mount.

Despite these challenges, the state government has a surplus in sales tax revenues and can use that money to serve its goals in access to the workforce, congestion mitigation and air quality, and enhancing vital connections for older adults and residents with disabilities. We urge the House Transportation Committee and House Leadership to support raising the Public Transportation Trust Fund's sales tax allocation just 1.8% - from 4.6% to 6.4% - and provide \$295million more dollars for our transit agencies at this time of urgent need. And best of all, this comes without raising taxes on anyone. For SEPTA alone, this erases \$190million of its projected FY2025 deficit.

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 survey after survey, transit riders agree: frequent and reliable service is the most important factor in use of public transit.

### **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 Transportation Committee 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.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you to the House 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. By increasing the state sales tax allocation to the Public Transportation Trust Fund, we can avoid raising taxes but ensure stability and enhance dependability for transit riders - commuters, our elders, our disabled family, and ensuring the success of

our biggest attractions. By passing local enabling legislation, we can access the federal dollars that will first fix and make accessible our commonwealth's transportation infrastructure, on the way to becoming world-class.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. We have a tremendous opportunity to capitalize on federal dollars and keep stable our fragile recovery in the wake of the pandemic. We look forward to the actions of Acting Chair, Representative Kyle Mullins and Chair, Representative Ed Neilson; Chair, Representative Kerry Benninghoff; and the remainder of the House Transportation Committee.