

PennDOT Written Testimony

House Transportation Committee

Hearing: Gaps in Rural Area Transportation

Wednesday, February 21, 2018

TRANSPORTATION IN RURAL AREAS

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania supports public transportation throughout the Commonwealth in a variety of ways.

FIXED ROUTE

Pennsylvania provides support for **fixed-route transportation**, which is “regularly scheduled general public transportation that is provided according to published schedules along designated routes, with specified stopping points for the taking on and discharging of passengers, including public bus and commuter rail systems and other department-approved service.”

- This service is provided in both urban and rural areas across the Commonwealth. There are 34 public transit systems (22 urban and 12 rural) that provide service in 48 counties.

Pennsylvania provides operating subsidies, which significantly reduce the fares charged to the public, and funds major capital investments that make it possible to acquire new buses; to construct maintenance/administrative facilities, parking facilities, and intermodal/transfer facilities; and to acquire IT and communications equipment and software.

SHARED RIDE

Additionally, the state supports demand responsive service, which is commonly referred to as shared-ride/paratransit service. **Shared-ride** is defined as “door-to-door demand transportation that is available to the general public on a nonexclusive basis, operates on a nonfixed-route basis and charges a fare to all riders.”

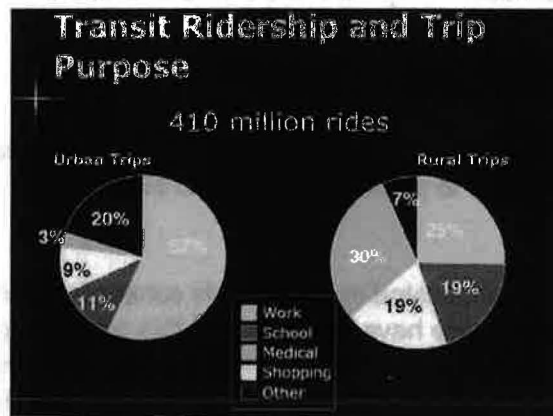
Shared-ride service started in the 1980s and was funded by the lottery program as a way to provide public transportation service to seniors across the state. As the program grew, a network of vehicles and providers developed and became the backbone for providing additional services throughout the state. Medical Assistance began to contract with transit providers to get low-income individuals to doctor’s appointments. In the early 2000s, the state also began to subsidize trips for individuals with disabilities. These services for persons with disabilities are now available in every county, with the exception of Philadelphia (because of the extensive system of fixed-route service and ADA complementary paratransit service), and provide a lifeline to these individuals which allows them to live in their homes longer, work, maintain basic needs, and even participate in community activities.

Some specifics about the shared-ride program in Pennsylvania include:

- Available to the public in all 67 counties
- Requires prior day reservation
- Local transit agencies set service parameters, which include where and when they provide service
- Senior citizens (65 and older) in all 67 counties pay only 15% of the general public fare, with the Senior Citizen Shared-Ride Program (Lottery funded) covering the remaining 85% of the general public fare. Senior citizens can have their 15%, or a

residents of the four suburban counties and others who commute into Philadelphia. The cost per passenger trip of a fixed-route trip in Philadelphia is approximately \$4.00. SEPTA supplements fixed-route service with shared-ride service for ADA-eligible persons and for senior citizens who cannot use fixed-route service. In the SEPTA area, the subsidy per trip (of the cost not covered by the passenger fare) is about \$2.18, or 54.5%

- Area Transportation Authority (ATA) of Northcentral Pennsylvania serves Cameron, Clearfield, Elk, Jefferson, McKean, and Potter counties. ATA operates 17 fixed routes over 5,000 square miles for 224,000 residents of the six counties. Service is available Monday through Friday from 5 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Saturday from 5 a.m. to 3 p.m. The cost per trip for a fixed-route trip in the ATA region is approximately \$10.00. The subsidy per trip is nearly \$8.00 in ATA's service area or 80%.
- On average, the statewide urban cost per trip is \$4.56 and the subsidy is \$3.02 (66.2%) while the statewide cost per trip is \$11.19 in rural areas and the subsidy \$9.69 (86.6%).
- Trip purposes vary greatly from rural to urban systems, as well. In urban areas, the majority of people are using public transportation for trips to work, while in rural areas, there are more varied trip purposes showing that people are depending on public transportation for lifeline services such as medical trips and shopping as well as work.



PennDOT often fields inquiries about and requests for extended service hours to address gaps in transit service. However, two studies conducted in the last 10 years demonstrate that extended service hours are not fiscally sustainable.

- STEP, the bi-county human service agency for Clinton and Lycoming counties, provided 24-hour shared-ride service until 2011. In 2010, STEP advised PennDOT that they were currently operating in the red with prior year losses of nearly \$1 million and were within days of a financial collapse. PennDOT hired an independent consultant to analyze STEP's operations and finances. We found that 2% of the service/trips occurred during evenings and overnight and 7% of the service was on weekends. Evening and weekend service cost 1.5 to 2 times more per one-way trip than service during core hours and was the primary cause of financial losses.

STEP elected to cut back on evening, late night and weekend service and make other modifications. In March 2016, STEP advised PennDOT that they had zeroed out the deficit due to the changes they had made and now operate on a

require more than a one day advance reservation. They also do not subsidize transportation for seniors or persons with disabilities to the extent that Pennsylvania does, if at all.

Because of Act 44 of 2007, we have a dependable source of state funding for both operating and capital. We can spend federal funds on capital for community transportation instead of using it to fund operations as many other states do. The investment we make in our public transportation infrastructure also allows us to provide other human service transportation more cost effectively. Since we are making the investment in that backbone of infrastructure., MATP and others who use our services, do not have to fund that capital investment. Since 2006, we have seen the average age of our shared ride vehicles decrease from 5.6 years to 4.5 years. Keeping the fleet in good condition allows our service to be more cost effective since we don't have to spend as much money on maintaining older vehicles. Having newer vehicles also allows transit agencies to have newer, more reliable vehicles which improves customer satisfaction.

PennDOT understands that people often think that establishing fixed-route service is the answer to shared-ride transportations gaps in rural areas. In most rural areas, fixed-route service hours will be limited and may not meet the true needs. In addition, fixed-route federal and state operating subsidies require a local match, which must be provided by municipalities/counties. In many cases, municipalities/counties cannot or are unwilling to provide the required local match.

Continuing to make improvements in shared ride service remains a goal for PennDOT and the transit agencies that operate those systems. Our goal is to ensure that the service is sustainable into the future and can continue to be available to all residents of the commonwealth.

We are open to suggestions and look forward to solving transportation issues in rural Pennsylvania.