



Susquehanna Regional Transportation Authority

Serving Adams, Columbia, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Harrisburg City, Montour, Northumberland, Perry, Snyder, Union and York

Good morning, Chairman Neilson, Chairman Benninghoff, members of the House Transportation Committee, fellow representatives, and a special greeting and appreciation for my representatives present. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the critical importance of transit funding in Pennsylvania, and particularly, in support of Governor Shapiro's proposal.

I am Rich Farr, Executive Director of rabbittransit, an eleven-county system offering urban and rural fixed route services, and demand responsive paratransit throughout our 6,000+ square mile service area. Our agency, like many others across the Commonwealth, plays a vital role in connecting Pennsylvanians to essential services, employment, and healthcare.

At rabbittransit, we witness daily how our services act as a lifeline for the communities we serve. Recently, we conducted a rider survey asking how transit improves our customer's quality of life. The importance of public transit came through loud and clear in both rural and urban areas. I used the feedback and insight gained from this survey to frame out my comments to you today.

We provide critical transportation for dialysis patients, with more than 90,000 trips a year, their reality is *literally* a matter of life and death. We connect workers to jobs -- in the words of one rider, "I have less stress knowing I can get to work. I have steady income for my family. I can get much needed medicine for my kids." We ensure seniors can age in place with dignity and independence with a quarter of a million trips provided last year on Senior Shared Ride. We connect veterans to VA healthcare to support those who've served our nation. Marine Veteran, William, shared with us, "We only have one vehicle and my wife works. The Vet bus picks me up right at my house. Without this service, I wouldn't be able to go."

Our shared ride program facilitates essential journeys for employment, and access to social services, food, healthcare and basic needs. A rural rider comments on the ability of transit to improve their quality of life, "I don't have to walk in bad weather, especially when it is time to do laundry. I don't own a washer or dryer." The rural challenge is a reality for many. Another rider shares, "It has been absolutely essential in allowing me to do shopping for my household

without having to force my child to endure, at times, freezing and unsafe weather conditions we would otherwise have to endure walking.”

We face significant challenges that threaten our ability to maintain these crucial services. One of our most pressing issues is the severe staff shortages, in both our fixed route program and in our shared ride/paratransit services. This shortage is exacerbated by the fact that our shared ride wages are competing against those offered by fast food restaurants and retail stores. We're losing valuable employees to these sectors, which impacts our ability to provide consistent, reliable service to those who need it most.

The looming "fiscal cliff" we are facing, coupled with increased operational costs and evolving ridership patterns, puts our transit system at further risk. We have been asked about fare increases. We will be implementing a fare increase in our fixed route program in the spring of 2025 in conjunction with a new fare collection system. Our shared ride fare increase goes into effect on October 1 of this year, taking our base fare from \$16.00 to \$20.00. This fare increase will not address the past loss in the program, it won't address future losses in the program. It simply covers the wage increase we gave last year to bring the CDL driver's wage in the rural areas to \$17.75 – equivalent to the starting wage at Dunkin Donuts in Selinsgrove. Without additional investment, we may be forced to implement service cuts that regrettably, would disproportionately affect our most vulnerable citizens. In the words of one such rider, “I have no family, no friends, no help. I had a stroke and damaged ankles. I still haven't gone to Walmart. rabbit told me they'll take me when I feel up to it. That will be great, so I can get shoes and all else I need.”

This is why I strongly urge you to support Governor Shapiro's proposal to increase the portion of state sales tax revenue dedicated to transit by at least 1.75%. This increase would provide the necessary funding to maintain and improve our services without raising taxes. It would also allow us to offer more competitive wages, helping us attract and retain the skilled workforce we desperately need to operate our shared ride services effectively.

The benefits of this proposal extend far beyond the transit-dependent population. Every Pennsylvanian, whether they use public transportation or not, benefits from robust transit systems. We create jobs, reduce traffic congestion, support

economic growth, and provide environmental benefits. In fact, transit agencies across Pennsylvania contribute significantly to the state's economy, with an average annual investment of \$450 million in Pennsylvania businesses and communities.

Moreover, demand for our services is on the rise. According to PennDOT data, total transit ridership increased by 18.5% in FY2023. This trend underscores the growing need for reliable public transportation across our state.

In addition to my strong support for the Governor's funding proposal, I also want to express my support for Senate Bill 597 and House Bill 1914, which would provide predictability in capital funding. These bills, along with the Governor's proposal, represent a comprehensive approach to addressing the diverse funding challenges faced by transit agencies across Pennsylvania.

In closing, I urge this committee and the entire General Assembly to act swiftly to support increased investment in public transportation. The decisions you make this session will have far-reaching impacts on the mobility, independence, and quality of life for Pennsylvanians for years to come. By supporting the Governor's proposal, service cuts can be avoided and we can instead focus on the future, ensuring economic growth, connecting people to the essential destinations they seek, and effectively competing in the labor market so we may continue to provide the high-quality, reliable mobility services our communities deserve.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.