



Pittsburghers for Public Transit

Pittsburghers for Public Transit Executive Director Laura Chu Wiens Remarks to the House Transportation Committee in Pittsburgh, 9/11/24

Good afternoon Secretary Carroll, House Transportation Committee Members, Allegheny County and Pittsburgh Regional Transit leadership. It's an honor to be able to address you today on behalf of transit riders here in Allegheny County and throughout the Commonwealth.

My name is Laura Chu Wiens, and I am the Executive Director of [Pittsburghers for Public Transit](#), a grassroots transit worker and rider union here in Allegheny County. We are also a founding organization of the statewide coalition [Transit for All PA!](#), with over 50 supporting organizations and thousands of transit rider and worker members hailing from Erie, State College, Harrisburg, Johnstown, Lancaster, Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, and Allentown, just to name a few. I call out these communities because we know that the viability and durability of public transit - and its essential role in moving people and in economic development- is not only at stake here in Allegheny County or in the SEPTA region, but in all of our main streets and communities across the state.

I know that this conversation today is about transit funding. But it is important for you to understand that as transit riders, **we are speaking out because we care about transit service, and the service outcomes of increasing, sustaining, or diminishing our transit operating funding.** We care about transit service frequency, its span, its reliability, and the likelihood that our bus lines, which are our lifelines, will be available next year and in five years near where we are choosing to live, to work, our grocery stores and hospitals and where we send our children to school. And because service outcomes are also linked to adequately funding the needs of the frontline workforce, we are very invested in their success, too.

Over the last twenty years, nearly 40% of service has been cut here in Allegheny County, in response to state transit funding cuts and transit funding stagnation despite growing costs over the past 12 years. However, the number of people who are non-drivers by way of income, disability, age (both youth and older adults), and immigration status - many of whom are wholly reliant on transit- has not commensurately declined. Here in the County and across the Commonwealth, that is estimated to be *nearly 30% of the population*. The consequences of those service cuts have been devastating across many metrics we measure- on ridership, on number of car commuters, congestion and road deaths- but also across many more metrics we don't measure - like student absenteeism, economic mobility for low-income households in the

County, preventative healthcare appointment attendance, and worker recruitment and retention in our healthcare, hotel and food service sectors.

This is not just an "us" problem. Communities across PA have already suffered the service cuts that the Philadelphia riders are facing with this imminent fiscal cliff. Riders in Erie lost all Sunday service during the pandemic, with no discernable pathway to restoration. Transit workers in Harrisburg are burdened from high healthcare deductibles that have harmed worker hiring and retention, which in turn has cut service in the Capitol region. Scranton transit riders now have service that, at its best, comes once every forty-five minutes, but mostly once an hour. That may sound reasonable, but imagine if your life was constrained to moving among a handful of destinations, in hourly increments where the last bus left at 6 pm. Where you had no public transportation on Sundays at all. What kind of sacrifices would you have to make to live under these circumstances?

So yes, we full-throatedly echo the call for the state to invest in transit riders, in transit workers, to invest in workplaces and access to education and food and other basic needs by passing a dedicated, increased funding source for transit operations. As Transit for All PA!, we brought over a hundred transit riders and workers to the Capitol this year to support the proposed 1.75% increased allocation of the sales tax to the Public Transportation Trust Fund as an important first step.

But we are here, for the long run, not to fight for funding that merely maintains a diminished status quo, but for a state funding plan that allows for the provision of transit service that truly meets the needs of our communities.

And that requires some vision and some political courage, both from transit agencies and from our state elected leadership.

One critical element is for the conversation to start from a different set of questions. Like: who is being served and not served by transit in its current form? Where are the gaps, the opportunities to grow? What level of transit service is needed to improve access and even to begin to achieve time equity with car drivers? It shouldn't be a sacrifice to be reliant on public transit.

And then: how much funding is required to make that a reality, and through what means can we source that funding?

The current legislative focus on budget rather than impact incentivizes transit agencies to squirrel away resources, to make cuts that stave off their funding cliffs but starve communities of access. Transit agencies are not banks. We riders, our economies, we need transit agencies to spend their resources and function as a stable public utility, not provide service in cycles of boom and bust.

The other critical element is process related: Because frankly, the chaotic, last minute scramble to pass a transit package does not inspire confidence that the state will provide ongoing

operational support for service restoration, let alone expansion. Delays in budget decision making are themselves costly, forcing planning staff to devote time to making a plan around service cuts, delaying hiring essential workers, and turning off potential riders that cannot or will not make life decisions around this level of uncertainty.

I know we are speaking to our supporters here, even our champions.

And it is because you are our champions and allies, I am calling on you to be bold. Fund transit, yes. But what your charge is not preventing a transit agency from economic distress, but rather to connect communities, to bolster economies, to create freedom of movement, uninhibited access, for all people in our state. Identify and focus on winning the solutions to the latter, not the former.

Thank you.