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House Transportation Committee Informational Meeting on Moving PA Forward by Investing in Roads, Bridges, and Transit

Transit Forward Philadelphia Testimony

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Introduction

Hello to 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 SEPTA region and across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. While our voices and perspectives are diverse in race, gender, ability, and the rural, urban and suburban communities in which we reside, 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 imminently advance legislation that will provide sustainable and reliable operations funding for public transportation, while working to secure significant capital investments in the years to come. SEPTA and transit agencies across the state are in crisis, and only weeks remain before service cuts and fare increases begin to commence, while many more will make permanent what was thought to be temporary reductions in service.

Though I am in and most represent southeastern Pennsylvania, we must remember that while transit is trains, trolleys, and buses in urban anchors to most, it is fixed-route service in State College, the incline in Johnstown, and shared-ride in even the smallest rural county. Public transportation affects us all.

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 ran out in April, with SEPTA specifically running a \$240million operating deficit - and passing a budget on the promise of the PA legislature providing needed funds while still dipping into reserves and cutting costs.

This year, Governor Shapiro proposed (and last year, the PA House passed) an increase in the state sales tax allocation to the Public Transportation Trust Fund - a conservative measure by any estimation, while states like New Jersey, New York, California, Minnesota, and others drastically change funding streams to stave off service collapse. Other measures are circulating, and in the wake of the legislature's inaction SEPTA has moved to increase its own fares while moving ahead on long-planned service enhancements like Reimagining Regional Rail and the New Bus Network, designed to attract new riders to the system.

Additionally, in response to rider feedback and the continued expressions of the legislature and other elected leaders, SEPTA passed Operating and Capital budgets with significant increases in funding under a new "Safe, Clean & Secure" section - including \$36million for vacuum trains and \$33million for a Cleaning Equipment Storage facility. SEPTA has also hired dozens more cleaning staff, and reached the full budgeted complement of transit police, leading to an over 30% decrease in violent crime year over year. All the while, its nationally-acclaimed SCOPE program has made over 80,000 touches and system removals to unhoused riders and/or those suffering from addiction. SEPTA is not a social service agency, yet as one of a dwindling number of public spaces remaining in southeastern PA, it has been forced to deal with issues not adequately being addressed by local, regional, and state government through housing or treatment services.

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 2026 alone, Pennsylvania will play host to an All-Star Game, the FIFA World Cup, and the Semisesquicentennial celebrations - all attracting a truly-global audience which simply cannot be accommodated by our roads and bridges.

In survey after survey, transit riders agree: frequent and reliable service is the most important factor in use of public transit. And ridership is returning! Just this month, SEPTA reached 80% of pre-pandemic service levels on regional rail due to increased operator hiring after lingering struggles, and overall ridership hit nearly 640,000 daily boardings: hundreds of thousands of more trips than on I-95 in a given day and up 18% from the previous July. Heck, before the onset of the pandemic, the Market-Frankford Line alone carried more daily passengers than I-95, yet the system has benefitted from neither the urgency nor attention of I-95 when its collapse occurred, drawing everyone from the Mayor to the Governor to the President to its aid.

This growth and opportunity must be nurtured, and given the chance to continue to expand. SEPTA is trying to negotiate and support its own future by making choices that will, indeed, challenge riders'

accessibility by increasing fares, reducing discounts, and cutting costs. What will the legislature do, in return?

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 and Senate 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 - a particular weakness in our trolley system in southeastern Pennsylvania, whose modernization remains unfunded to the tune of \$1 billion.

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 further than already proposed. Or in the case of systems like Pittsburgh Regional Transit, simply make permanent what they have already done over the last two decades, reducing service by 40%. If we do not act, we will kneecap the entire commonwealth. We will worsen health outcomes by reducing shared-ride service in every county; we will worsen pollution and congestion by reducing transportation options; we will worsen economic activity by limiting job access; we will worsen the crises of social participation among the disabled, youth, and the elderly by taking away transportation options when they cannot drive by necessity. And we will embarrass ourselves on the world stage by degrading our transportation network at the kinds of "peak need" by which we certainly do our road and highway and parking projections.

The Pennsylvania legislature can still act to prevent these outcomes. It can come together to solve the immediate operating crisis, while laying the foundation for future capital investments to stimulate manufacturing jobs across the commonwealth alongside economic activity in the locations where these projects will be built.

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