



**September 18, 2024**

**To: Chairman Ed Neilson, PA House Transportation Committee, Kerry Benninghof, Republican Chair**

**From: Bob Previdi, Policy Director, Save the Train, WMAN**

**Subject: Public Transit Investment - Post-COVID - Preparing for 2026 and Beyond**

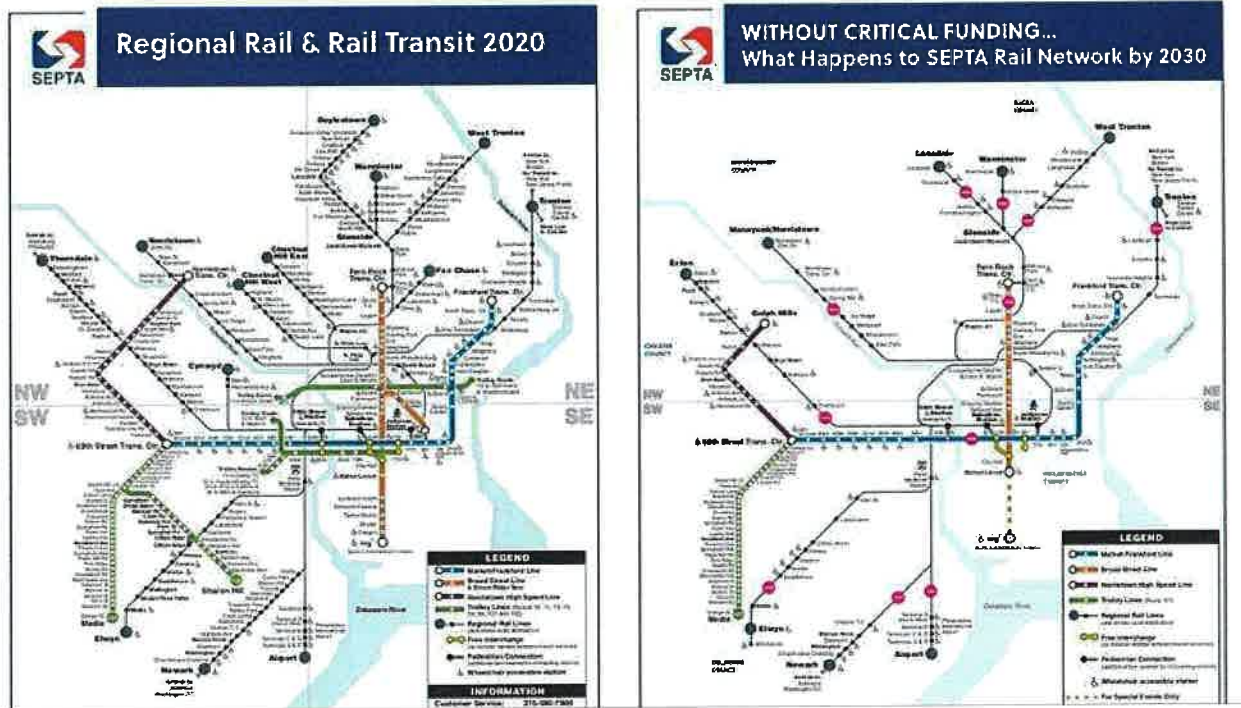
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**Good morning, Chairman Neilson and Republican Chair Benninghof and members of the committee.**

**Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Save The Train Coalition, an ad-hoc group of members from Nicetown, Germantown, Mt. Airy and Chestnut Hill formed to fight the closure of the Chestnut Hill West Regional Rail line and other service cuts that will be necessary if SEPTA's budget gap isn't closed this year.**

**Late last year, we got a copy of SEPTA's "doomsday map," which you can see on the screen. It's a stark rendering of severe cuts we may**

face if you and your colleagues don't provide additional support for the 2025 budget.



Our 8,000 members and over 70 organizations from Northwest Philadelphia support the Governor's proposal to save our public transportation. We are counting on you to help preserve this crucial service during a pivotal time. It's true that the Covid pandemic hurt ridership, and we agree that SEPTA needs to evolve. But SEPTA is already reviewing its bus routes and exploring more efficient ways to use the Regional Rail system. This effort needs to be encouraged by investing in more frequent and efficient service and safety initiatives, not draconian cuts.

Each element of SEPTA's extensive network of trolleys, buses, trains, and subways face its own challenges. But we cannot simply accept

**declining ridership as an insurmountable problem. This system is too vital to our city and region, preventing gridlock and supporting economic activity.**

**And we have other strong reasons to support transit on the horizon. In 2026, Philadelphia will be in the global spotlight. Are we ready? No. Can we be? Absolutely.**

**America's 250th birthday celebration, the Major League Baseball All-Star Game, and FIFA's six World Cup matches will draw hundreds of thousands of visitors, and they'll both want and need to take transit. We must ensure our public transit system can handle this influx effectively, efficiently, and comfortably.**

**Without full funding for this year's budget, SEPTA must divert attention to balancing the books by cutting services — jeopardizing our ability to make a positive impression to the thousands of visitors in 2026.**

**Starving SEPTA right now is like an Olympic marathoner cutting calories right before a race. At the same time, our region — from Doylestown to Thorndale — depends, and deserves a strong transit system. Rail and trolley service helped build Philadelphia and its suburbs, and SEPTA is critical to continuing that growth without clogging our roads and highways with endless traffic. Other cities are spending billions trying to put transit systems back that were ripped out in the 50s but we already have a system. Why not take advantage of this amazing infrastructure by improving it?**

**Yes, there are problems: Our members say service frequency and safety are major obstacles to riding transit. To address these issues,**

**we propose the following recommendations with an eye towards supporting SEPTA in the short and long term:**

- 1. Legislative Support: We need your commitment to secure funding that prevents service cuts, and allows for increased frequency, and manages the safety issues that hurt ridership.**
- 2. Fix City Hall/Suburban Station: While a full station rehab before 2026 is not feasible, the City Hall and Suburban Station complex needs a refresh. It sits at the heart of the transit network and the empty storefronts, bad signage, and an atmosphere of lawlessness need to be dealt with. The station experience must be more fun and inviting for visitors and citizens alike. It's depressing, fix it by inviting the Mural Arts Program and students to put more fun 1776-themed artwork on blank walls.**
- 3. Focus on supporting Septa's efforts to help the homeless and helpless who are riding trains with no place else to go. Crime was down 37% on SEPTA systems during the first half of 2024, thanks to efforts by the agency and the SEPTA police. But SEPTA still suffers from a perception of safety as a major problem. This is why the physical environment, signage and communications are all pivotal parts of the equation and support a comfortable environment, and must be improved, especially at key transfer hubs.**

**Finally, the City and Commonwealth also must do much more to support SEPTA's outreach programs. SEPTA is not a social services agency and can't be expected to go this alone. But what they have accomplished so far is an impressive first step.**

**We must help SEPTA in assessing just how large the problem is and find ways to support the human beings who are suffering and riding the system. And we need to do it 24/7.**



**Drawing on historical examples, we know change is possible. In the 1970s and 80s, NYC Transit faced a collapse with severe ridership declines due to rising crime and dirty stations, and malfunctioning trains and buses. Under David Gunn (who used to lead SEPTA) and Police Commissioner Bill Bratton, initiatives to reduce crime and fix the physical conditions of trains, buses, and stations helped ridership surge back from 3.3 to 5.5 million daily riders. We should aim for a similar transformation that revitalizes how we view and use our**

**existing system in Philadelphia. If you have not seen 5th Street on the Market Frankford Line, go take a look, it is what we should aim for.**



**At Save The Train, we believe our public transit system is a crucial part of Pennsylvania's multimodal transportation network. While COVID has negatively impacted ridership, we cannot simply give up.**

**In fact, we must double down on assessing problems and making changes that will draw riders back, and use 2026 as a rallying cry to make those changes happen, in much the same way as Los Angeles is using the 2028 Olympics to build out its transit system.**



**SEPTA has a vast network that supports southeast PA and is the best way to reduce traffic congestion and is an important part of the Commonwealth's multimodal transportation system that includes roads, bridges, airports, and seaports. I know the legislature is working on fixing long term funding for transportation but we can't forget SEPTA's budget this year - we need to make it whole.**

**Submitted by,**

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