

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Speakers: Port Authority cuts to create big hardship

By Tom Fontaine

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Evelyn Nickle of Swissvale urged Port Authority leaders to walk a mile in her shoes -- something she'll have to do more of next year if bus service is cut and fares are increased.

"How do you walk with a cane and carry groceries across two busy streets?" asked Nickle, 61, of Swissvale, who is legally blind, partially deaf and has two artificial knees.

The authority on Thursday held a 12-hour public hearing at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center, Downtown, on proposed changes that include:

- Reducing the number of routes from 129 to 85.
- Laying off 555 employees, raising single-trip fares and transfers by 25 cents, and charging \$4 premium fares on the T and longer suburban express routes.
- Cutting service hours by 35 percent.

About 200 people registered to speak at the hearing, with authority officials saying testimony could influence lawmakers to come up with money to close the agency's \$47 million budget deficit.

"We know riders will suffer. We know employers will suffer. And we know businesses, schools and all types of community institutions will suffer," Port Authority CEO Steve Bland said. The authority averages 220,000 passengers on weekdays.

Bland blamed the shortfall on a federal decision to block tolls on Interstate 80, which would have generated \$472 million for transportation projects in Pennsylvania. A transportation caucus, gathering legislators from the state Senate and House, is scheduled Monday to discuss the funding issue.

"It seems you relied on money that wasn't there," said Katrina Kilgore, 27, of Mt. Washington. Kilgore said she has epilepsy and has never driven. Cuts, she said, "will hurt seniors, students and the working class."

Speakers who addressed Bland, senior managers and Port Authority board members painted a bleak picture of life after cuts, saying they'd struggle to get to doctor's appointments, work, school and social engagements. Many predicted community will suffer. Some called for management pay cuts.

Doubletree Hotel General Manager Tim Zugger, president of the Greater Pittsburgh Hotel Association, said 80 percent of the Doubletree's 150

employees rely on public transportation. "Further cuts will prevent hotels and other Downtown businesses from maintaining staff," he said.

John Tague of Greenfield said cuts would "have such a severe impact, we might not recover from it," particularly people with disabilities. Tague, who uses a wheelchair, said he often watches three to four packed buses go by before one stops with room for him to board.

Representatives from UCP/Class in Oakland said 61 of their 137 home-health aides would struggle getting to work and clients' homes. Each aide has one to four clients, many of whom could be forced to move into nursing homes without home care, said Lucy Spruill, director of public policy.

Spruill said cuts would cripple the region's transportation network. "I promise people who have never ridden a bus ... will have their ability to get to work impacted," she said.

Chris Sandvig, project manager for Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group, a nonprofit consortium of community organizations representing low-income neighborhoods, agreed.

"If you cut in one area, the costs incurred in other areas will be staggering," Sandvig said.

David Onorato, executive director of the Pittsburgh Parking Authority, said city parking garages are at least 93 percent capacity on average. The cost of building a new garage could be \$25,000 a space, he said.

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