

Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group: Testimony to the Pennsylvania House Transportation Subcommittee, Republican and Democratic Policy Committees

Representatives Markosek and Geist, members of the House majority and minority public policy committees, welcome to Pittsburgh and thank you for holding these hearings on such a vital issue in crisis. And, as I have seen from news clippings around the state, it is clear that all of us recognize what a crisis this really is.

Transportation is at the heart of a civil society. Without a robust and diversified transportation system, we cannot put food on the table, keep a roof over our head, and get to work or school. Yet, for decades, Pennsylvania has spent most of its time building into the hinterlands rather than investing in the infrastructure that made it an economic powerhouse in the first place. Our choices have caught up with us, with roads crumbling and – near and dear to western PA – bridges in danger of being closed or worse, falling into the chasm they span. PennDOT seems to have taken to heart a “fix-it-first” approach and the Keystone Principles are a roadmap for wise investment, and we applaud this. Obviously, however, we still need the money.

Much has been made of transportation infrastructure over the years, and what it means. What is too often overlooked, however, is the role mass transit of all forms plays in our economy. It is vital to the survival of our cities – every city across this Commonwealth – a lifeline for seniors, and, without it, our crumbling infrastructure becomes even worse off than it is now.

Southwestern Pennsylvania is home to 8 mass transit operators, serving a market of over 2.5 million. The largest, of course, is the Port Authority. I will come back to them in a minute, but first it is important to recognize that the other 7 operators are just as vital to our region’s economic health and many have gained ridership for years.

It’s also important to remember this: for a region our size, we are heavily reliant on transit. Places 2, 3 times as large as southwestern PA don’t have our ridership numbers. This is important in order to understand the economic impact of the current crisis. It’s also important to recognize that mass transit works in most Pennsylvania counties – 51 total, serving well over 60% of Pennsylvania’s population.

The Port Authority of Allegheny County is the cornerstone of our system, and I am sure you are aware – or harbor some thoughts of your own – about its effectiveness. Considered too bloated, too inefficient, too secret, the Port Authority has made many changes since the 2006 Transportation Funding and Reform Commission findings were released. Pensions and healthcare were renegotiated. 15% of the system was cut. A \$1.1m route restructuring is underway to make it more efficient. However, even with all this, service cuts continue to threaten the region – especially with the failure of Act 44. With no slack left in the system please understand: these are dire cuts, hurt taxpayers of all stripes, and threaten southwestern Pennsylvania economy. And let me be clear: these are voting, working, taxpayers. Over 70% of the region’s transit riders work full-time.

On Monday, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reported that a \$50 million gap could result in service cuts of 25% or more. What this means is over 55,000 people could be stranded daily, forcing them to spend \$8,100 each – over \$420 million countywide - more per year to live their lives. Consider the economics of this decision:

- To save the Commonwealth \$50 million, we are asking Allegheny County taxpayers to spend \$420 million. This sounds like the most classic case of sending good money after bad. Who has an extra \$8,000 lying around?
- This \$420 million does not stay in the region, or the Commonwealth, for that matter. It goes to companies like BP, Toyota, Kia, and Chevron. So, we’re asking taxpayers to spur economic and workforce development in states and countries far flung from our own. The story is the same in the other 51 counties - Pennsylvania creates jobs elsewhere when transit gets cut.

- While creating jobs elsewhere, and contribute to a national security threat, hundreds - possibly thousands – risk losing their OWN jobs. These are not just bus and trolley operators, or mechanics:
 - 50% of all Downtown workers – over 40,000 - take transit, 30% in Oakland. These numbers are not small. Over 40% of Allegheny County’s jobs are in Downtown and Oakland. Yet, Downtown, 3% of the vehicles – buses and LRT – bring half of us to work. You think Downtown is crowded now? Add at least 30 minutes to your commute from Monroeville, and you start to see the picture.
 - And where will those people park? Our garages are 90% full. We already pay close to the highest parking fees in the nation, and parking garages cost \$17,000 – per space – to build. Can we afford new garages?
 - Finally, we are fooling ourselves if we think those jobs will simply leave go to Monroeville, Cranberry, Southpointe, or some other suburban center. If it were possible, they would already have done so, like they have in Buffalo or Detroit. 2/3 of our jobs are in the city – in fact, Pittsburgh has more jobs than residents. We have the nation’s 6th – densest employment center for a reason – people can’t drive across town to go to work. So where will the jobs go? Out. Out of the region.
- Can our roads – also facing a funding crisis – handle another 40,000+ cars daily? At least 14 million more trips per year? How much new asphalt will we need to lay? In 2004-05, we spent over \$110 million to resurface 6 miles of I-79. That dwarfs what it would cost – billions - to widen our Parkway East and West, over decades, to accommodate this new traffic. And, where do you put an 8-lane Parkway East?

One of the most vulnerable populations – our seniors – are in dire need of robust transit. In southwestern Pennsylvania, especially, this is a huge issue. Isolation of seniors causes all kinds of social and health ills, and not protecting Our Greatest Generation – the ones who built America, the ones who turn out to vote no matter what – hurts us all and damages our legacy as Americans.

There is no question that you, our representatives, have a daunting task ahead of you. In the face of a \$1+ billion shortfall this year and looming multi-billion deficit for 2010-11, transportation is but one of the crises. However, this has been a growing problem for years and will continue to do so. In this decade alone, we have faced several funding crises for transit and transportation. We strongly urge Legislators to support the funding levels recommended by the Transportation Advisory Committee. We also urge you to look at a menu of funding opportunities – vehicle registration fees, tolls, increased efficiencies in purchases, gasoline taxes, and so on – to provide a stable base of funding to the system.

Pittsburgh is unique. Pittsburgh is special. Cities two, three times our size don’t use transit as much as we do, nor are they as reliant on landmark bridges that are in some cases over a century old. In Sunbelt cities, they’re actually spending billions to build a system with comparable reach. Why? Because robust transit means a robust, stable economy with opportunity for all. It’s the cornerstone of a thriving community, and its stability contributed to our own stability during these horrendous economic times. People from all walks ride transit. Rich, poor, black, white, Republican, Democrat, suburbanite, city dweller. Without it, Pennsylvania risks an even further slide that it can ill-afford. Thank you.