

# IMPROVING PUBLIC TRANSIT

Rev. Dr. Faith B. Harris // Virginia Interfaith Power & Light // fharris@vaip.org  
Victoria Higgins // Chesapeake Climate Action Network // vhiggins@chesapeakeclimate.org  
Faith Walker // RVA Rapid Transit // faith@rvarapidtransit.org

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Safe, reliable public transportation is essential to ensuring that all Virginians have access to basic necessities like groceries, healthcare, schools, and jobs. As personal vehicles are responsible for the greatest share of Virginia's carbon emissions, high-quality public transit is also a key tool to meet the Commonwealth's climate goals. Yet public transportation is severely underfunded, leaving many Virginians with few or unsafe options for moving around their communities without a car. On top of its central importance to ensuring mobility for all, protecting public health, and meeting our climate goals, the dramatic inflation of gas and vehicle costs proves that providing access to fast, frequent public transit is critical to help keep households' costs down.

## CHALLENGE

At a time of unprecedented federal funding and state budget surpluses, Virginia's transit systems continue to face uncertainty regarding resources for the essential services they provide. From the basics of employing enough bus operators and mechanics to increasing efforts to electrify public transit vehicles, providers need to be able to rely upon steadily increasing sources of funding. The austerity the commonwealth's dozens of transit providers have to deal with is an inexcusable disservice to the hundreds of thousands of Virginians who rely on bus or rail to get to work<sup>1</sup> and the thousands of dedicated public servants who work at our transit systems.

In 2018, riders of Hampton Roads Transit (HRT) suffered 18,653 scheduled buses that never showed up.<sup>2</sup> With new attacks on transit funding, that number is poised to increase.

This is unacceptable during a time when historically high gas prices and personal vehicle costs have many Virginians turning to low-cost or fare-free public transportation.<sup>3</sup> The price of used cars has jumped by 29.8% – a whopping \$7,282.<sup>4</sup> Without sufficient funding for maintaining and improving existing infrastructure, as well as increasing frequency of service, commuters may be forced to shoulder the increasingly exorbitant cost of personal vehicle use.

Moreover, public transportation is an essential tool in our fight against climate change. Because underfunding of transit has led so many residents of the Commonwealth

to use personal vehicles, transportation accounts for more than half of the state's emissions.<sup>5</sup> Virginia cannot sustain such high levels of carbon pollution from cars and expect to meet pressing climate deadlines. Even if the U.S. is able to switch 70 million drivers to EVs, we still need to reduce per-capita vehicle miles traveled (VMT) by 20% in the next eight years via solutions that include increased transit ridership.

## SOLUTION

For transit to reach its full potential as a climate and economic solution, the General Assembly must better fund transit systems. Lawmakers have already signaled their intention to do so through their authorization of the 2020 Transit Equity & Modernization Study. Now, they must follow through to implement recommendations to improve public transit and benefit all Virginians.

Specifically, Virginia needs increased funding for the expansion and frequency of routes, as well as for implementing safety and amenities such as benches, shelters, and trash receptacles to improve rider comfort and experience. The state should provide funding to install infrastructure, like sidewalks, crosswalks, signage and pedestrian signals, to improve rider safety and provide better accessibility for older adults and riders with disabilities, as well as attract new riders. Through executive and legislative action, elected officials should champion public transportation as a central strategy to meet Virginia's climate goals.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Remove the 2024 sunset clause on Virginia's zero-fare program to keep transit systems fare free.

\$10 Million per year for the Transit Ridership Incentive Program (TRIP) to expand regional service and keep transit affordable.

Increase transit funding to meet the needs identified in DRPT's 2022 Transit Modernization and Equity Study, including increased bus route frequency and improved quality of rider experience through safety infrastructure such as covered stops, benches, sidewalks, and pedestrian crosswalks.

Pumphouse Trains |

Photo by Lucas Manweiler