

MODERNIZING PUBLIC TRANSIT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public transportation provides tremendous benefits to the communities it serves. Our buses, trains, trolleys, and ferries offer greater mobility, reduction in traffic and carbon pollution, and economic growth.

CHALLENGE

The pandemic pummeled our transit systems, impacting ridership, employee recruitment and retention, and operational costs. However, public transportation's recovery is well underway: Hampton Roads Transit's ridership is nearly 60% of pre-pandemic levels and growing, Virginia Railway Express' ridership is up 400%, the Metro recently hit its highest ridership day in nearly a decade,¹ and Alexandria's DASH and Richmond's GRTC are two of the seven largest transit nationwide that have exceeded their pre-pandemic ridership.² Commuter services are still building back due to the increase in telework; however, many systems' core routes are performing better than ever.

Workforce recruitment and retention remain difficult, with several transit systems facing operator shortages. For example, GRTC is 18% below its driver targets, Harrisonburg Transit is 25 drivers short of its goal, and Roanoke's Valley Metro needs 30 additional drivers.

Replacing aging infrastructure has also gotten difficult. Pre-pandemic, it would take about a year for a replacement bus to hit the streets after ordering it. Today, the wait time could take 2+ years, particularly for zero-emission buses. The nationwide trend of fleet electrification is also increasing the need for transit agencies that haven't already begun their zero-emission transition plans to start that planning process.

The final challenge is the lack of dignity, accessibility, and essential infrastructure at many bus stops. The 2021 Transit Equity and Modernization report found that just "11% of (Virginia) bus stops have a shelter, 19% have a bench, and only 38% fully comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act".³ Most of Virginia's bus stops are simply signs stuck in the ground.

SOLUTION

Transit ridership in Virginia has been trending upward for decades. In 2019, over 412,000 trips a day were taken on public transportation, resulting in 1.03 billion passenger miles taken off our roads, preventing the burning of 17 million gallons of fuel and the release of 155,000 metric tons of CO2 pollution. Additionally, public transit generated nearly \$2.4 billion in economic benefits for the Commonwealth that year.

For public transportation to continue its strong growth and meet the moment by modernizing fleets and increasing access, our systems need additional funding and innovative policymaking.

Perfect examples of this are Hampton Roads Transit, Mountain Empire Transit, and Bay Transit which have piloted microtransit and seen a doubling of ridership in parts of their region. Such service allows agencies to provide on-demand, door-to-door service in low-density areas where fixed routes may not be the best fit. DRPT's pilots have also shown that ridership strengthens on fixed routes when these routes are connected to microtransit services.

Expanding and maintaining zero or reduced fare programs, as demonstrated by Richmond, Charlottesville, Alexandria, Petersburg, Blacksburg, and others can play a key role in rebuilding and increasing ridership. Additionally, several transit systems are increasing driver pay by as much as 40% to help attract and retain employees in a competitive job market.

About 14% of eligible Virginians don't have a driver's license and 6% don't live in a household with an automobile. To enhance accessibility, investment in essential stop infrastructure such as benches, shelters, lighting, sidewalks, and crosswalks is necessary. Recent state legislation allows for up to 30% of the Transit Ridership Incentive Program (TRIP) to be dedicated to transit stop infrastructure, but more funding is needed.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Protect and increase existing statewide and regional transit funding including addressing WMATA's fiscal cliff.

Improve transit ridership by expanding service, continuing zero and low fare programs, and encouraging dense land use around stops.

Increase regional transit funding in under-invested areas.

Expand the TRIP program to include zero-emission transition plans for transit systems.

Expedite and streamline the implementation of last foot transit infrastructure (bus stop benches, shelters, crosswalk and lighting, etc).

Advocate for fair allocation of federal and state multimodal grants to transit projects.