

# EXPANDING OUR TRANSIT SYSTEMS

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## WHY IT MATTERS

Robust public transportation and rail systems are essential to Virginia's environmental sustainability, economic competitiveness, and public health. Transportation accounts for approximately 47% of Virginia's greenhouse gas emissions, with single-occupancy vehicles being a major contributor.<sup>1</sup> Expanding and improving transit options not only reduces emissions but also improves air quality, supports equitable mobility, and connects communities to economic opportunities. Investments in public transit and rail can significantly reduce household transportation costs, which are the second-highest expenditure for most Virginians after housing.

Reliable transit also helps reduce traffic congestion, a major source of localized air pollution. According to the American Public Transportation Association (2022), every \$1 invested in public transit generates approximately \$5 in economic returns.<sup>2</sup> Rail infrastructure also helps mitigate urban sprawl and conserves green space, further reinforcing Virginia's climate and land use goals.

Ensuring long-term funding and policy support for transit and rail is therefore critical to achieving the Commonwealth's climate goals and strengthening the well-being of its residents.

## CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Virginia has made notable progress in expanding transit and rail through initiatives like the Virginia Passenger Rail Authority (VPRA) and the Transforming Rail in Virginia (TRV) program. The Commonwealth Transportation Fund (CTF) supports public transportation through dedicated state and federal funding, including revenues from fuel taxes, vehicle registration fees, sales tax, and an assortment of other fees. The Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) administers these programs and provides planning as well as technical and financial support to local transit agencies.

The establishment of the Transit Ridership Incentive Program (TRIP) in 2020 within the Commonwealth Mass Transit Fund was a pivotal development for public transit. TRIP provides grants for low or zero-fare programs that have demonstrated significant increases in ridership, particularly for low-income and transit-dependent populations; safety improvements including bus shelters and benches; and multi-jurisdictional regional routes. However, the current law includes a sunset clause that threatens the TRIP's safety and the bus stop improvement program's long-term viability.

Virginia continues to face challenges in ensuring consistent, sustainable funding for transit operations, especially as federal pandemic relief dollars expire. Local governments often carry the burden of matching funds, creating disparities in service across the Commonwealth.

## OPPORTUNITIES

To maintain and grow a sustainable, equitable transportation future, Virginia should focus on three critical areas:

- Ensuring the continued success of the TRIP program's safety and bus stop improvement program.
- Increase and Stabilize State-Level Transit Funding: Virginia should consider adding additional dedicated, sustainable, and recurring revenue sources for our transit and passenger rail programs.—A statewide funding model would relieve pressure on local budgets and create more uniform access across urban, suburban, and rural communities.
- Ensure that transit gets a portion of any regional transportation revenue.

Virginia has a unique opportunity to lead the South in modernizing its transportation infrastructure while reducing emissions and increasing access to jobs, education, and healthcare.

## TOP TAKEAWAYS

Transportation is Virginia's largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, and investing in transit is critical for meeting climate and equity goals.

The Transit Ridership Incentive Program (TRIP) has proven successful and the removal of the safety and bus stop improvement program's sunset clause could allow that success to continue.

New statewide and regional funding for transit could enable us to maintain our current levels of service.

## ENDNOTES

1. *Greenhouse gas inventory and emissions report. Commonwealth of Virginia.* (2023). Virginia Department of Environmental Quality. <https://www.deq.virginia.gov/home/showdocument?id=15633&t=>
2. *Public transportation facts.* (2022). American Public Transportation Association. <https://www.apta.com/news-publications/public-transportation-facts/>

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