August 10, 2017 | Allegheny Institute Op-Ed

510 words

Pesky issues dog Port Authority

By Colin McNickle

Recent developments regarding the Port Authority of Allegheny County put the mass-transit agency's management and operations in a very unbecoming light, say scholars at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

Particularly vexing is that the authority's "underlying cost problems have yet to be addressed in a substantial way," say Jake Hauk and Eric Montarti (*in Policy Brief Vol. 17, No. 32*).

To wit, the latest performance review by the Bureau of Public Transportation, utilizing numbers reported to the National Transit Database (NTD), shows far higher operating costs in certain categories than 12 other peer transit agencies. Comparisons were made for fiscal year 2014 and over a five-year period ending in 2014.

For bus service, the Port Authority's operating costs per revenue vehicle were found to be 37 percent higher than the peer group average, the researchers note.

For the "T," the light-rail system, operating cost per passenger was 31 percent higher than that average, say Haulk, the Pittsburgh think tank's president, and Montarti, a senior policy analyst there. The authority's five-year trend for light rail was just over 28 percent higher.

Haulk and Montarti say it's interesting to note that over the period of 2005 to 2014, again based on NTD statistics, vehicle revenue miles and hours for buses both have been reduced by almost 30 percent while unlinked passenger trips fell only 10 percent.

"That indicates a lot of underutilized routes were eliminated along with frequency of service cutbacks on some routes," they conclude.

To be fair, the Port Authority was found "in compliance" on *most* reviewed metrics. But "it was one of five agencies with a bus operating cost per passenger of $5 or more in fiscal 2014."

"With other transit systems having lower costs … there is a lot of room for improvement," Haulk and Montarti stress. "This is even more true with respect to costs per revenue hours of operations. That ratio was obviously not improved by the elimination of underused routes and cuts in frequency of service."

But those are not the Port Authority's only problems. Among them, Haulk and Montarti say the matter of a new CEO presents particular peril.

First, it raises questions about what the foundation helping to underwrite the lion's share of the CEO search expects in return. A better use for that money -- $100,000 – could be to establish a fund to subsidize monthly passes for the poor, they say.

Second, a transit group's demand that the new CEO include community voices in all decisions "will create a long-term problem of inaction on needed objectives and on actions that make the operations more expensive and even less efficient," Haulk and Montarti say.

Indeed, the new CEO, working with the Port Authority's board of directors, should seek input on significant service changes, they say. "But for all decisions to go before community groups would be a time-consuming, controversy-inducing disaster."

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