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PRT must economize or see funding cut

Should Pittsburgh Regional Transit (PRT) not soon make serious cost-containment efforts, state legislators who hold the purse strings should consider pulling those strings tighter to force the issue, concludes an analysis by the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

“The renamed PRT must focus intently on the factors it can control to address costs for taxpayers that heavily fund the system,” says Eric Montarti, research director at the Pittsburgh think tank.

“In light of the outrageous per rider costs on buses and light-rail, if ridership does not increase dramatically by yearend, PRT needs to look at bus routes with extremely low levels of ridership and either cut trips or begin shifting service to much smaller vehicles that consume much less fuel and have, overall, drastically lower operation costs,” Montarti stresses (in *Policy Brief Vol. 22, No. 33*).

“On light-rail the options are limited to fewer trips and running single trains,” the researcher added.

PRT’s May 2022 average weekday bus ridership (the latest available month) was down 46 percent from the May 2019 level -- an enormous failure to recover ridership losses that occurred during mandated coronavirus business and school closings. This was an improvement over May 2021, when ridership was down 62 percent from May 2019.

Saturday and Sunday ridership was down 36 percent and 30 percent, respectively. Average bus ridership for all days was 41 percent lower in May 2022 compared to May 2019.

That said, average weekday light-rail ridership was down 76 percent from pre-pandemic days -- only a minor improvement from May 2021 when it was down 79 percent compared to May 2019.

Saturday ridership remained 65 percent lower than pre-pandemic. Sunday was the only day with light-rail ridership close to half of May 2019. Overall, average light-rail ridership on all days in May 2022 was 69 percent below May 2019.

A PRT official previously conceded the pre-pandemic ridership model likely is never to return.

Yet PRT continues to talk of *extending* light-rail service to points North and West?

Additionally, PRT has not laid off employees as ridership tanked and struggles still. Is it a testament to the stranglehold that organized labor has on the agency or merely poor management?

The cost of the agency's much-ballyhooed, electric-bus using Bus Rapid Transit Project between downtown Pittsburgh and Oakland has ballooned millions of dollars beyond original estimates. Can you say North Shore Connector? Can you say budding boondoggle?

A system rebranding – from the Port Authority of Allegheny County to Pittsburgh Regional Transit – will cost more than three-quarters of a million dollars. Isn't that rather pricey lipstick for the same old problem-plagued pig?

And PRT's operating budget for Fiscal 2022-23 is up 5.1 percent from the last fiscal year.

“Given [ridership and funding] uncertainty ... it might make one think that spending would be held flat or even reduced,” Montarti observes.

Should costs not be constrained, and operations reformed, “it is incumbent upon the General Assembly to review the financial support it provides the transit agency,” the think tank scholar notes.

“With the recent state Auditor General's performance audit of the [Pennsylvania] Turnpike's finances, perhaps alleviating that entity from the \$50 million [annual] obligation [to mass transit statewide] and forcing transit agencies to look for efficiencies is a good place to start,” Montarti concludes.

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