



PRT should right-size weak performing routes; governing bodies should insist on it

Summary: Bus and light-rail ridership on Pittsburgh Regional Transit (PRT) vehicles remains far below pre-pandemic levels. This *Brief* examines route data for August 2022 compared to the pre-pandemic month of August 2019 and recommends corrective actions.

Policy Brief Vol. 22, No.33, utilized PRT’s performance metrics and system data tool which shows average monthly ridership for buses and light-rail on weekdays and weekends.

Ridership and costs

Compared with pre-pandemic August 2019, average August 2022 bus ridership was 37 percent lower and average light-rail ridership 52 percent lower. Low ridership exacerbates PRT’s already high operating costs. Using the same methodology described in the *Brief* noted earlier to determine cost per passenger, bus trips in August cost \$9.87 per rider and light-rail trips were \$25.92. PRT’s current fiscal year (FY) budget is higher than last year’s budget and there were no employee layoffs. And the bus rider cost is an average over all routes. Owing to the large variation in usage levels across the routes, there is a similar variation in costs per rider among the routes.

The PRT data tool shows ridership by route. In August 2022, PRT operated 95 bus routes and three light-rail routes. Routes operated on one of three schedules: seven days a week, weekdays only or on weekdays and one weekend day. PRT’s annual service reports classify operations as “rapid,” (fixed guideway for at least 75 percent of the route); “commuter,” (connect major job centers); “local,” (no fixed guideway and average weekday ridership of 1,000 or more), or “coverage,” (same as “local” but average weekday ridership of less than 1,000).

Of the 95 bus routes, 64 operated seven days a week (62 of those were “local” or “coverage”); 29 operated on weekdays only (25 of those were “commuter” or “rapid”); two operated on weekdays and one weekend day (one was “local” and one was

“commuter”). The three light-rail routes operated seven days a week and were classified as “rapid.”

In terms of the percentage difference in average daily ridership in August 2019 compared to August 2022 (Saturday and/or Sunday service was added on 11 bus routes in this time frame, but comparisons were made only on common days of operation), the routes ranged from 11.4 to 86.9 percent below the three-year-earlier level. Four routes having the smallest three-year shortfalls—less than 20 percent below August 2019—ranged from 11.4 to 14.3 percent lower. All four were “local” or “coverage” routes. There were two routes for which August 2022 ridership exceeded August 2019; both occurred on a weekend day of operation.

Three years ago, nine routes had average daily ridership of 10,000 or more. In August 2022 there were only four such routes. The bus route with the highest average ridership this August was the 51 route, which had average ridership of 11,493. There were 34 routes with ridership 50 percent or more below ridership three years ago. Meanwhile the light-rail Red Line had average ridership of 10,601, a drop of almost half from August 2019.

The table below shows the 10 routes with the largest percentage declines in ridership from 2019 levels. All 10 routes terminate in downtown Pittsburgh. All were bus mode, all operated weekdays only and all but one was “rapid” or “commuter.” This is likely due, in large measure, to the continuing shift to remote work occurring in office settings in the City of Pittsburgh and other commercial centers in the county. Bear in mind, too, that 24 additional routes not shown had ridership declines of 50 percent or more. On bus routes, the average \$9.87 cost per bus trip could double for routes with ridership 80 percent or more below the August 2019 level and depending on the length of the average passenger trip.

PRT August Route Performance, 2019 to 2022

Mode	Route #	Days of Operation	Type	2019 Avg. Daily Riders	2022 Avg. Daily Riders	% Difference
Bus	G31 - Bridgeville Flyer	Weekdays Only	Commuter	689	169	-75.5
Bus	O12 - McKnight Flyer	Weekdays Only	Commuter	1,376	326	-76.3
Bus	O1 - Ross Flyer	Weekdays Only	Commuter	1,263	275	-78.2
Bus	P12 - Holiday Park Flyer	Weekdays Only	Commuter	1,219	257	-78.9
Bus	P71 - Swissvale Flyer	Weekdays Only	Local	565	118	-79.1
Bus	65- Squirrel Hill	Weekdays Only	Commuter	436	86	-80.3
Bus	G3 - Moon Flyer	Weekdays Only	Commuter	982	162	-83.5
Bus	P13 - Mount Royal Flyer	Weekdays Only	Commuter	376	62	-83.5
Bus	P2 - East Busway Short	Weekdays Only	Rapid	1,520	215	-85.9
Bus	Y1 - Large Flyer	Weekdays Only	Commuter	741	97	-86.9

Remedial and cost-cutting recommendations

As was argued in the previous PRT *Brief*, if ridership does not increase dramatically by year’s end, 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. Note that currently, of the 725 buses PRT operates, 30 are 35 feet in length, which is the smallest size bus PRT operates. On light-rail the options to lower operating costs are limited to fewer trips and running single-unit trains.

Although PRT adjusts service on a quarterly basis, with the next adjustment scheduled to go into effect in November, the very low-performing routes should be candidates for changes along the lines suggested above.

PRT is utilizing federal COVID aid to fill shortfalls and how long that money will last depends on how ridership recovers. The entities that provide recurring taxpayer subsidies to PRT—Pennsylvania, Allegheny County and the Regional Asset District (RAD)—should re-evaluate support if significant service changes don't happen. To date, there has been no indication of a change in their funding levels.

The state's FY2022-23 budget shifted sales and use-tax money to replace Turnpike dollars (as was directed by Act 89 of 2013) in the public transportation trust fund that subsidize PRT and other transit agencies in Pennsylvania. PRT has received \$68.3 million in state operating assistance through September, the first three months of the current fiscal year. Legislators need to look at ridership at all systems across the state and consider cutting funding if ridership remains dramatically below pre-pandemic levels.

Allegheny County's alcoholic beverage and vehicle-rental taxes and a RAD grant match the state dollars that come to PRT. Both the county's and RAD's budgets have to be approved by the end of the year. The county is budgeting \$49.5 million and RAD's preliminary budget includes \$3 million. That latter amount has been requested and approved each year since 2013 even though RAD board members urged state and local leaders to find other sources of money when the initial grant was made. RAD now has even stronger grounds for refusing to contribute.

It is past time for these governing bodies to be much better stewards of the tax dollars sent to PRT and to go further and demand remedial steps to reduce PRT operational costs that were far out of line with other transit agencies before the pandemic.

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