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How the next ACE can start fixing PRT

By Colin McNickle

Change is in the air with the coming election of a new Allegheny County chief executive (ACE) in November. And once the new ACE takes office in January 2024, he or she can help ensure that change is the operative word to begin fixing the long-out-of-step Pittsburgh Regional Transit, conclude researchers at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

“When will PRT move from being an authority with expansionist tendencies to one that efficiently operates the mass transit service it has?” ask Eric Montarti, research director, and Scott T. Cross, research assistant, at the Pittsburgh think tank.

“Much of that attitude shift has to come from the board,” the researchers say (*in Policy Brief Vol. 23, No. 25*). “The chief executive should also be vocal about not pursuing major building projects in the face of declining ridership.”

Simply put, PRT costs for providing bus and light-rail service consistently rank near the top in the country among mass-transit agencies. Ridership has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels.

“The data for May 2023 show average bus and light-rail ridership were 35 percent and 45 percent lower, respectively, than in May 2019,” Montarti and Cross note. “This same data demonstrate that, of 96 bus routes, 30 were functioning at or below 50 percent of May 2019 ridership.

“In many cases, certain routes were operating substantially below 50 percent. Average ridership across all bus routes and three light-rail routes ranged from 3.2 percent to 85 percent below May 2019,” the think tank scholars say.

It is important to remind that in a 2022 *Policy Brief* (Vol. 22, No. 39), comparing August 2019 ridership to August 2022 ridership, 10 weekday bus routes were found to be the worst-performing routes. Since that time, there has been little change: nine of those maintained their status as among the 10 worst performing in May 2023.

“With minimal change to service, vehicle fleet and the long-standing factors PRT identifies as driving its cost structure, the cost per bus rider in fiscal year (FY) 2021-22 was \$11.94 and per light-rail rider \$33.64 and have regularly been higher than peer transit agencies,” Montarti and Cross remind.

Pittsburgh Regional Transit is, ostensibly, an “independent” authority. But the chief executive can shape its direction through the power of board appointments. The ACE appoints six members of the 11-member board; the governor and legislative leaders appoint the other five.

Montarti and Cross recommend that the next chief executive appoint no-nonsense board members that will push for changes to future labor contracts, service levels, fares and fleet that realistically align with ridership and with the imposts paid by county taxpayers.

More specifically, that should include, among other things:

- pushing for, in the next round of union contract talks, disposing of a poison pill that ties the hands of the authority to use smaller buses on some fixed routes;
- concentrating on lowering PRT’s historically higher-than-peer-agency costs;
- resisting the temptation to impose new local taxes (now under consideration in the state Legislature) instead of paring those costs;
- shelving pie-in-the-sky expansion projects that can only further strap taxpayers.
- advocating for the Legislature to bar public transit workers from striking, the current right of which gives organized labor an oversized cudgel that serves to keep personnel costs artificially and unnecessarily high.

And it is only through these measures, taken directly or indirectly, that the new Allegheny County chief executive can begin the long overdue process of restoring the Pittsburgh Regional Transit’s operational and financial efficacy, if not sanity.

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