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Again, PRT, first help thyself

By Colin McNickle

As state budget negotiations come down to the June 30 wire and transit agencies across the commonwealth continue to lobby for the most taxpayer bailout money they can secure, we've repeatedly heard, and read, that Pittsburgh Regional Transit (PRT) can't cut its way out of its latest fiscal "crisis."

But scholars at a Pittsburgh think tank beg to differ, as they consistently have for years.

"The Allegheny Institute repeatedly has detailed how PRT has one of the highest bus operating expense per vehicle revenue hour in the country," say researchers Eric Montarti and Alex Sodini.

"Ridership is still down significantly compared to pre-pandemic levels (35 percent lower in April 2025 compared to April 2019), and change is desperately needed," they stress (in *Policy Brief Vol. 25, No. 20*).

Montarti, the think tank's research director, and Sodini, a research associate there, remind that to address a $100 million budget deficit in Fiscal Year (FY) 2025-26, PRT has proposed service cuts and a fare increase.

Concurrently, PRT is hoping that the commonwealth's upcoming budget will provide more funding for mass transit. But, "In doing so, PRT would avoid the proposed changes but more funding without reforms won't address PRT's costs," Montarti and Sodini say.

"In 2023, PRT's operating expense per vehicle revenue hour was $258.02. This was sixth-highest of the 43 agencies of the top 50 in the U.S. (based on ridership) that operated buses," the researchers calculate. The average for the remaining agencies was $188.52. For the nine PRT-chosen peer agencies it was $195.52.

PRT operated just over 1.4 million annual bus vehicle revenue hours in 2023.

"If PRT was operating at the average expense of the 42 other agencies or that of its peer group, its bus expenditures would be $98 million or $88 million lower, respectively," Montarti and Sodini say.

"These savings alone would cover most of the anticipated deficit," they say. "Taxpayers, especially those outside of PRT's service area, should not be forced to make up the difference for PRT's bloated costs."

Without additional funding, PRT is planning to enact the proposed service cuts and fare increase in February 2026.

"Rather than finding more ways to feed PRT's never-ending appetite for revenue, the General Assembly should be focusing on PRT's exorbitant costs," emphasize Montarti and Sodini.

"Ending the right of transit workers to strike and encouraging contracting-out and/or outright privatization would be far more sensible solutions than wasting more taxpayer money on PRT," the think tank researchers conclude.

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