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## PRT, other transit agencies, missed chance to rein in costs

By Colin McNickle

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a major decline in public transportation usage in 2020 as huge numbers of commuters worked from home instead of traveling to a workplace.

That work-from-home culture has persisted and continues to be realized in languishing passenger counts, not only for Pittsburgh Regional Transit (PRT) but for other transit agencies around the country, say researchers at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

But a troubling ancillary metric surfaced as ridership lags became chronic, say Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Pittsburgh think tank, and Frank Gamrat, its executive director (in *Policy Brief Vol. 26, No.5*):

Expenditures per trip, both for bus and light rail, rose sharply for PRT and four other transit agencies – those in Baltimore, Boston, Denver and Houston – during the five-year period of pre-pandemic to post-pandemic, *even at those with a relatively small decline in numbers of passenger trips*, the Ph.D. economists found.

“In general, total operating costs for each city and both transit modes have risen over the five years while passengers have declined for each city and for both” buses and light rail, Haulk and Gamrat say.

“The pandemic shutdown should have afforded transit agencies, like PRT, an opportunity to right-size operations by trimming expenses,” the researchers say. “Instead, federal money kept them from facing realities that must be dealt with.”

PRT’s bus passenger count fell precipitously during COVID and by 2024, four years later, the number of trips remained substantially below the 2019 level with a drop of about 40 percent, the think tank scholars found.

It was the second-highest among the five cities in this study group, barely trailing Denver (on a percentage change basis) and with a substantially larger decline higher than the other three. “Note that although it has the largest population service area, Houston’s bus passenger trips were lower than PRT in 2019,” Haulk and Gamrat say.

“And with continually rising expenditures—although PRT was the lowest among the five cities at 17.7 percent—PRT’s nearly 40 percent decline in bus trips boosted bus operating expenses per bus trip by 94 percent, from \$5.90 to \$11.47, a near-doubling and the second-highest-per-trip expense in the group, trailing only Denver.

“It is important to bear in mind that overall consumer prices from December 2019 to December 2024 rose only 22.8 percent, far less than the increases to expenses per trip for all the transit agencies,” the think tank researchers add.

For each transit agency in this studied quintet, Haulk and Gamrat say the declines in light-rail trips were larger than the declines in bus trips in each city. Light-rail usage is likely to have been more affected by the pandemic than bus usage given it is a primary means of transportation for workers commuting longer distances from suburbs to jobs in central cities.

“In all likelihood, the work-from-home culture that began during COVID has not been fully reversed as many employees still work from home, depriving light-rail of a large number of passengers,” the researchers say.

Looking at the transit agencies’ light rail numbers, Denver had the largest decline in ridership, a loss of nearly 55 percent from 2019 to 2024. Pittsburgh’s PRT had the second-biggest loss at nearly 53 percent. Both cities sustained much larger light-rail passenger declines than the other three cities in this group.

“Along with the increase in total operating expenses, serious drops in passengers have produced huge increases in expenses per trip,” Haulk and Gamrat reiterate. “PRT had the smallest increase in total operating expenses at just 16 percent, far below Boston’s 38 percent jump.

“However, coupled with the large drop in ridership, PRT’s expense per trip in 2024 reached a whopping \$24.24—an increase of 145 percent from pre-pandemic 2019. PRT also had the highest expense per trip in 2019 at \$9.88. Boston had the smallest expense per rider in both years (\$3.38 and \$7.25, respectively),” the think tank researchers found.

Haulk and Gamrat say that as firms, such as PNC, force their employees back into the office on a five-day-per-week basis, perhaps the passenger totals will rise and the expense per trip will fall.

Nonetheless, “transit managers must make major efforts to rein in operating expenses dramatically. The taxpayers that support mass transit deserve better than having to pay such outrageous subsidies per rider,” the researchers conclude.

“Politicians should take a long, hard look at these cost numbers and work to reduce them.”

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