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PRT's woes are self-inflicted

By Colin McNickle

Pittsburgh Regional Transit (PRT) has consistently failed to adjust to myriad changing metrics – economic, population and operational -- resulting in a continuing higher than necessary cost structure, concludes a researcher at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

"PRT has been operating in an overall long-term weakening environment regarding the number of potential riders on the buses and light-rail system," says Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Pittsburgh think tank (in *Policy Brief Vol. 26, No. 34*).

And prior institute research "showed PRT to have a relatively high-cost structure in terms of expense per unlinked bus passenger trip compared to several other transit agencies" he reminds.

It was back in 2005 that PRT, then known as the Port Authority of Allegheny Couty, had a passenger count for bus and light rail of 66.2 million. By 2010, the total had fallen to 63.4 million. Just before the COVID hit in early 2020, passengers totaled 62.2 million.

Haulk says that after falling sharply in 2020, the passenger count recovered to 36.1 million in 2025, 42 percent below the pre-COVID reading. A further small rise in ridership in 2026 lifted the number to 38.1 million. (The annual counts reported are based on the fiscal year of July 1 of the prior year to June 30 of the reporting year.)

Haulk notes that in 2005, PRT spent $310 million ($165 million in 1984 dollars or $2.50 per passenger). By 2010, expenditure rose to $363 million ($173.3 million in 1984 dollars or $2.73 per passenger), he says.

Then, in pre-COVID 2019, spending stood at $441 million ($178.9 million in 1984 dollars or $2.87 per passenger served). Finally, in 2025, budgeted expenditure climbed to $539 million ($173.7 million in 1984 dollars or $4.81 per passenger).

"This represents a massive increase in real spending per passenger compared to pre-COVID levels," Haulk stresses.

But Haulk notes, during the 21st century, the population of Allegheny County (the principal source of PRT passengers) slipped from 1,281,666 in 2000 to 1,250,578 in 2020, to 1,225,035 in 2025 with an estimated 1,222,896 in 2026.

Meanwhile, he says, the population of the City of Pittsburgh, a major source of passengers, also suffered an ongoing long-term decline over the period. Note that in 1990, Pittsburgh's population was 369,879. By 2000, the population had declined to 334,563. By 2010, it had fallen further to 305,704 and slipped to 302,971 in 2020. There was a slight pickup to an estimated 307,632 in 2025.

Now, to employment: Allegheny County employment, "a major driver of public transportation usage," Haulk reminds, has seen long-term weakness in terms of growth since 1999 when it reached 645,777 in July of that year. After many years of relative weakness and a major drop during COVID, employment has yet to recover to the pre-COVID high of October 2019 when it reached 648,307, barely above the July 1999 reading.

"The latest reading of July 2026 places county employment at 634,252, below the July 1999 level by 11,000," the Ph.D. economist says. "Decades-long weakness in net employment gains has no doubt contributed to the lack of ridership growth at PRT."

But while the difficulty in long-term employment and population gains can explain the lack of growth in passengers, it "falls short in explaining why ridership remains 40 percent below the pre-COVID 2019 reading," the think tank researcher finds.

"To be sure, the 40 percent decline in ridership must fall heavily on bus usage since it accounts for a huge majority of transit passengers. To the extent that public transportation use is driven by the need to get to a job, anemic job gains would explain some of the drop in ridership.

"And while overall the employment count is modestly lower than in 2019, employment might have shifted somewhat in terms of location, with more jobs that require shorter commutes," says. "In addition, there could be more work-from-home jobs, at least several days per month."

And, clearly, Haulk says there is an implication of greater automobile use to get to work, to school or for other purposes. Increased commuting by automobile (including ride-sharing) would be reflected in traffic levels during rush hours.

So, "Have fares and transfers increased enough to discourage PRT riders?" he asks. And, "(H)as the lasting effect of the COVID pandemic discouraged people from getting on public transportation, especially buses?"

National data appear to not bear that out.

"According to a *muniintel* report of February 2026, national bus ridership by 2025 had reached 86 percent recovery to the 2019 level. Meanwhile, light rail was 76 percent recovered to the 2019 reading," Haulk says. "Thus, PRT with ridership recovery at 60 percent through 2025 trails well behind the national recovery as reported by this service."

Haulk says Pittsburgh Regional Transit is facing a dilemma of its own long-term making.

"It has allowed costs to escalate in the face of a slow-growth or no-growth economy.

"Elected officials have failed to exercise due control and oversight out of political expedience.

And "Failure to recognize the stagnation in job and population growth has led to a failure to adequately rein in costs at PRT," Haulk concludes.

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