

# ***POLICY BRIEF***

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## **Where Are the Predicted Transit Riders?**

The Port Authority has spent a lot of money on capital projects over the last few years and plans to spend hundreds of millions more building the North Shore Connector. For an authority that has had to rely on emergency handouts from the state to balance its budget in recent years, and is looking at another large deficit this fiscal year, one must wonder why so many huge capital projects have been undertaken.

When large projects are announced, they are always accompanied by claims they will produce an increase in riders or some other usage to justify the expenditure of tax dollars. For example, the Wabash Tunnel was projected to carry 4,500 vehicles per day but fell woefully short of those numbers and may be closed by the end of the year. The \$21 million South Hills Parking Garage, located at the light rail stop near South Hills Village, has an average daily use rate of 13 percent (275 of 2,200 spaces). It is so underused that PAT has blocked off the upper floors. The story is much the same for the West Busway which was opened in 2000 and has never lived up to ridership predictions.

The persistent inability of PAT to hit predicted ridership is not a problem confined to PAT. Looking at a sample of thirteen cities around the country indicates that in a majority of areas bus ridership has been on the wane. Table 1 below shows the annual bus passengers in these cities for 2000 and 2004 (the latest national data available) along with percentage changes over the four year period.

Table 1

<b>Annual Unlinked Passenger Trips—Bus (in thousands)</b>			
<b>City</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>Percent Change</b>
Charlotte	12,784.9	18,255.8	42.79
Philadelphia	161,213.1	187,510.5	16.31
Boston	98,584.1	113,768.3	15.40
New York	821,944.5	893,390.1	8.69
Chicago	302,089.6	294,030.8	-2.67
Kansas City	14,734.5	13,963.1	-5.24
Cleveland	51,591.5	47,631.2	-7.68
Los Angeles	347,451	318,512.8	-8.33
San Francisco	96,394.5	87,471.7	-9.26
<i>Pittsburgh</i>	<i>66,554</i>	<i>58,297.8</i>	<i>-12.41</i>
Denver	61,036.4	51,228.1	-16.07
Atlanta	83,119	66,762	-19.68
Columbus	18,727.3	14,544	-22.34

Only four of the cities had gains in bus ridership during this time, Charlotte, Philadelphia, Boston and New York. The remaining cities, including Pittsburgh, experienced a drop in bus ridership. It is interesting to note that while Denver's ridership on its publicly operated bus system fell (-16 percent), ridership on its purchased bus service, which includes any transportation provided by private carriers under contract to public agencies, had increased by 123.3 percent—carrying more than 9 million passengers in 2000 to carrying more than 20.1 million in 2004. The big jump in Charlotte riders probably reflects the fact that the fast growing region was being underserved in 2000.

Table 2 shows total ridership for all modes of transit service, including light rail, subways, and purchased services.

Table 2

<b>Annual Unlinked Passenger Trips—All Modes of Service (in thousands)</b>			
<b>City</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>Percent Change</b>
Charlotte	13,404.3	18,875.6	40.82
Boston	354,860.3	389,910.3	9.88
Denver	76,823.3	82,362.8	7.21
New York	2,499,974.5	2,655,645.3	6.23
Philadelphia	317,254.7	332,690.4	4.87
Chicago	479,586.6	474,750.7	-1.01
San Francisco	226,182.2	215,743.7	-4.62
Los Angeles	416,818.7	393,598.0	-5.57
Cleveland	63,561.9	57,868.3	-8.96
Kansas City	15,193	13,385.9	-11.89
<i>Pittsburgh</i>	<i>75,130.6</i>	<i>66,021.1</i>	<i>-12.12</i>
Atlanta	167,067.1	136,157.1	-18.50
Columbus	18,859.3	14,703	-22.04

Five cities had passenger gains while eight experienced declines in total transit system usage. Pittsburgh had one of the biggest drops among the 13 cities with a 12 percent dip in passengers. All this suggests that Pittsburgh's problems with lack of ridership growth are not unique.

Passenger data provided by the Port Authority for 2005 (69.3 million) and 2006 (58.8 million through October) indicate a very modest rise in passenger count from 2004, no doubt driven by the enormous hike in gasoline prices and the opening of the Overbrook light rail line. Nonetheless, the number of riders remains well below the level reached in 2000 (75.1 million). But this is not new—the trend in public transportation usage has been sliding for forty years. In 1960, Census data showed that 24 percent of Allegheny County's workforce used public transportation to get to work. That percentage fell over the decades to just 10 percent in 2000. And as the County continues to lose population, the low percentage using transit will translate into ever diminishing numbers of transit passengers. At best, PAT can expect very flat usage numbers unless there is a further large jump in gasoline prices above current levels.

Despite evidence that public transportation use has been in long term decline, not just in Pittsburgh, but in many major cities, the Port Authority continues to be aggressive with capital projects. The impending travesty is the North Shore Connector which will not live up to the ridership projections used to secure federal funds. This project will almost

certainly produce massive cost overruns and require diversion of state funds that should be dedicated to repairing the sub-standard roads and bridges across Pennsylvania. Rather than embarking on this money wasting project, PAT needs to look inward. The authority needs to focus on reducing expenses and streamlining services. The best way to do this is to maintain high volume routes while trimming lower-use ones. Privatizing service and operation functions needs to be adopted as soon as possible. Until the Port Authority becomes more efficient and starts to grapple seriously with its extremely high costs, it will continue to run large deficits that taxpayers will be asked to cover and their financial situation will never improve, no matter how many extravagant and easily dismissed promises about turning things around they make.

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