June 8, 2020

Senator Robert Menendez  
528 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Menendez,

We write to you today on behalf of the nearly one million daily riders of NJ Transit: commuters, students, workers, and residents of New Jersey. Today we released the results of a survey of over one thousand public transit users, many of whom are your constituents, and their answers constitute a call to action for further federal support of public transit. We call on you to honor the needs of your constituents, especially those essential workers who have relied on transit during the worst of the pandemic, and support federal funding for transit in the HEROES Act.

Since New Jersey went on pause in March 2020, ridership on NJ Transit fell to record lows, with approximately 98% fewer riders on some parts of the system than normal. Due to the parameters of the pause, the vast majority of the riders who continued to rely on NJ Transit were essential workers whom we are dependent upon to carry out key functions of our civil society. Even at its lowest ridership, thousands of workers relied on NJ Transit every day. NJ Transit did not buckle; even under these extraordinary circumstances, they continued to move our state’s and region’s heroes on a daily basis, thereby keeping our state’s essential services functioning and allowing the rest of us to shelter in place safely.

NJ Transit is the nation’s fourth-largest transit system. We owe it to our states’ riders and our essential workforce, many of whom lack employer-provided health care or sick leave and yet still risked their lives to provide needed services, to keep the transit they rely on functional and affordable.

Decreases in fares, tolls, and tax revenues due to coronavirus have totaled approximately 80 million dollars a month since the pause began March 12. We are grateful and appreciative of your championing of the CARES Act. The $1.43 billion dollars that NJ Transit received was critically important in the early days of the crisis to keep our region’s transit from collapsing. Unfortunately, the national formulas upon which it relied short-changed the large urban transit systems by favoring small systems over large ones. These were critical funds that forestalled the worst, to be sure, but it is clear the system will require more, and soon, to survive. The agency will likely need $1.2 billion more dollars in federal aid to continue service through the fiscal year of 2021.
Given the tremendous losses of farebox and toll revenues, the need to keep the bulk of the transit system moving even with a greatly diminished passenger load, and the costs of cleaning and virus-proofing NJ Transit, more funds are needed as our state and region ramp up. We already see ridership moving up as more people are returning to work. Beginning today, Monday, June 8, with Phase 1 re-opening for NYC going into effect, more New Jerseyans will resume commuting via NJ Transit (as well as PATH) to work in NYC. Beginning June 15, New Jersey will enter Stage 2 of its re-opening which will lead to significantly more people using NJ Transit.

To underscore just how critical funding is for our transit systems, we surveyed both riders actively using their local systems as well as riders who are currently non-active (people who normally ride transit but are not currently using it due to the “pause”). Our survey reflects the severe dropoff in transit use, with under ten percent of the more than 1,000 respondents reporting that they were actively taking transit during the pandemic. Among these riders, who are primarily essential workers, the most common intervention requested was for more public transit service to allow for greater physical distancing. Our survey results also show that the vast majority of non-active riders expect to return to transit if agencies take the right precautions, with only eight percent of respondents reporting that they would not return to transit or would only return in the case of a vaccine. That means that transit agencies need operations funding now to safeguard transit for the 92% of non-active riders who want to return to our trains and buses.

Public transit is a necessary service that deserves federal support, and transit aid has to be non-negotiable in the next COVID-related funding bill that comes before you. Our state and our region depend on public transit, and the nation’s recovery depends on the recovery of New Jersey and the tri-state area. Our riders—your constituents—have spoken clearly, and they want to see you prioritize additional funds $1.2 billion in funds for NJ Transit.

Sincerely,

Nick Sifuentes
Executive Director
Tri-State Transportation Campaign

Felicia Park-Rogers
Director of Regional Infrastructure
Tri-State Transportation Campaign

**Riders’ Recommendations for the Post-COVID Commute Report** [here](#).