June 8, 2020

Senator Pat Toomey
248 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Toomey,

We write to you today on behalf of the tens of thousands of commuters, visitors, students, workers, and residents of Pennsylvania who ride public transit, particularly SEPTA and PATCO. 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 Pennsylvania went on pause in March 2020, ridership on SEPTA fell to record lows, with approximately 94% fewer riders on the system than normal. Due to the parameters of the pause, the vast majority of the riders who continued to rely on SEPTA and other transit authorities in PA were essential workers. They were nurses, home health aides, janitors, security guards, grocery workers, transit operators, and many other essential workers whom we all are dependent upon to carry out key functions of our civil society. Even at its lowest ridership, thousands of workers relied on SEPTA and PATCO every day. Pennsylvania’s public transit authorities 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.

SEPTA is the nation’s fifth largest transit system and sixth largest rapid rail 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.

Meanwhile, SEPTA faces by far the greatest fiscal crisis since World War II. Decreases in fares and toll road revenues due to the coronavirus pandemic are in the hundreds of millions. We are grateful and appreciative of your championing of the CARES Act. The $653 million SEPTA received was critically
important in the early days of the crisis to keeping our region’s transit from collapsing. Unfortunately, the national formulas upon which it relied short-changed large urban transit systems by favoring small systems over large ones. To be sure, these were critical funds that forestalled the worst, but it is clear the system will require more, and soon, to survive. The agency will likely need hundreds of millions of dollars more in federal aid to continue service in our state and region through fiscal year 2021.

Given the tremendous losses in 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 SEPTA and PATCO, more funds are needed as our state and region ramp up. We already see ridership moving up as more people are returning to work locally and regionally. As re-opening for the region goes into effect throughout the month of June, more Pennsylvanians will resume commuting in their local jurisdictions, across the state, and regionally. We call on you to bring more transit funds home to our state’s workers and riders in the next round of COVID-19 related funding.

To underscore just how critical funding is for our transit systems, we surveyed 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”). Approximately 10% of our respondents are users of SEPTA and PATCO. 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 Pennsylvania and the tri-state area. Our riders—your constituents—have spoken clearly, and they want to see you prioritize additional funds for Pennsylvania’s public transit authorities.

Sincerely,

Nick Sifuentes
Executive Director
Tri-State Transportation Campaign

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