

The R8: We Are Not Out of the Woods Yet

By

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Everyone in Northwest Philadelphia took a deep breath on hearing that SEPTA was proposing a new budget that did not call for the discontinuation of either the R8 train or the C bus. There is no doubt the effort of so many citizens in Chestnut Hill, Mt. Airy, Germantown, and East Falls to petition and lobby for our train and bus lines had much to do with this decision. The efforts of our political leaders—State Senator Schwartz, State Representatives Washington and Myers, and Council members Miller and Nutter—to lobby for our train and bus lines should be commended as well.

Yet before we get carried away congratulating ourselves, we need to read the fine print of SEPTA's new budget. To look at it closely is to see that we are not out of the woods yet. The threat to the R8 remains extremely serious and perhaps even severe. Consider two of the reasons:

First, the budget SEPTA's board passed last Thursday has a \$41 million dollar hole in it. SEPTA expects the state to fill this hole. I am not so optimistic. Now it is hard to know what is going to be the outcome in this year of budgetary chaos in Harrisburg. But, after discussions with some of our state representatives in the last few days, my take on the negotiations in Harrisburg is this: We are unlikely to see much more than a partial restoration of the cuts enacted in the budget passed earlier in the year without the enactment of new taxes dedicated to public transportation. The trouble is that even a full restoration of the \$11 million cut would leave SEPTA \$30 million in the red. And that would put the R8 right back on the chopping block. Right now, the odds of new dedicated funding for SEPTA are not great. There are some proposals along these lines before the House and Senate including a small increase in taxes on new tires and car rentals. But the Republican leadership, which has control over both legislative bodies, has not endorsed these taxes. And, while Governor Rendell would probably favor them, it is not clear he will fight for them. He has other objectives—such as his proposal for a large income tax increase to fund education—at the top of his agenda. Given how difficult it will be for the Governor to attain these other goals, there is some question about how active he will be in fighting for funding for public transit.

Second, even if SEPTA gets the \$41 it wants from Harrisburg, the budget enacted last week contains serious and, over the long term, potentially fatal cuts to the R8 line. Beginning in September, trains during off-peak hours will run only once an hour on the line. And on weekends there will be ninety minutes between each train. This proposal is both foolish and, over the long term, dangerous. It is foolish because it will not save much money. It could be disastrous because, with each cut in service, more and potential riders will look for alternatives to the R8. Even if few people ride SEPTA during off-peak hours, those that do typically travel in a peak time train during one leg of their round trip. If these cuts in service are put in place, fewer people will take the train to center city in the morning if they plan to return mid-day. Who wants to take the chance of missing a train and then waiting for an hour or ninety minutes in Suburban Station? And, as more people find alternatives to the R8, and ridership declines, we can expect SEPTA to respond with further service cuts. This is totally unacceptable. We did not fight to keep the R8 off the executioner's list to see it die of a thousand cuts over the next few years.

So what do we do now? The immediate task to secure state funding for SEPTA that, at the very least, fills the \$41 million hole in its budget. That means we must put pressure on the Republican

leadership in the House and the Senate. We need to contact them directly. And we have to encourage Republican members of the General Assembly who come from the greater Philadelphia area to work to provide public transportation funds that their constituents needs as much as we do. We also must remind Governor Rendell that public transit is absolutely crucial to everything else he seeks to accomplish. We need much more active support from him than we have seen so far. Addresses for all of these political officials can be found on the website of the Northwest Campaign for Public Transportation (www.wman.net/ncpt).

Once the overall shape of the budget is set, we need to lobby SEPTA to rescind the cuts in service that will begin in September. We have to encourage our local political officials to be helpful here. Our efforts to help SEPTA to win more support from Harrisburg will help as well. If we in Northwest Philadelphia continue to provide leadership on the public transit issue, SEPTA will find it hard to repay us back with destructive cuts to the R8.