

SEPTA is Beyond Band-aid Fixes

By Marc Stier

**Center City Press
October 20, 2004**

The crisis in transit funding is real. SEPTA is facing a \$62 million deficit for the current year. Without new, dedicated funding for public transportation from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, SEPTA will be forced to institute a fare increase of 25% coupled with a gigantic reduction in service of 20%. Weekend service will be eliminated as will much evening service.

This, we know, sounds familiar. It seems that SEPTA threatens fare increases and service reductions every year. And every year, at the last moment, SEPTA receives an infusion of funds, its proposed cuts and fare increases are rescinded, and life goes on much as it has before. So why should we believe the threat this year?

One answer is that SEPTA was not crying wolf in the past. Other major transit agencies have what is called dedicated funding, tax revenues that automatically go to support public transportation. SEPTA has substantially less dedicated funding than any comparable transit agency in the country. Other major transit agencies receive substantial and increasing funds from their state government. After taking inflation into account, support from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for SEPTA has declined by 1.3% a year for the last ten years. And, from year to year, there is no guarantee for any level of funding.

Indeed, last year, the Governor and General Assembly initially cut funding for SEPTA by about 6%. SEPTA is required by law to balance its budget. So, in most years, the transit agency is forced by law to put forward a draconian budget until our State Representatives and Senators and our Governor to come up with the minimal funding necessary to avoid decimating the system.

Another answer is that life has not gone on much as it has before. Every year SEPTA receives less from the state than it needs to maintain service. As a result, service has again and again been reduced on one line after another. And the quality of SEPTA's service has declined as well. As a result many inconvenienced riders have found other means of commuting. In the worst cases, workers have had to give up good jobs, students have had to stop going to schools outside their own neighborhood, and seniors have been forced to stay at home. The result of these cutbacks are clear: Uncertain funding has lead SEPTA into a death spiral that leads from service reductions to declining ridership to reduced income and then to service reductions once again.

A third answer is that only dedicated funding will allow SEPTA to plan for the future. SEPTA cannot invest in the improvements we need in public transportation (extended service hours; a new fare collection system; easier transfers; better signs)without some assurance that it will have sufficient funds from one year to another.

A fourth answer is that every year the fiscal crisis gets worse and worse. Stop-gap funding does nothing to solve the underlying problem. Last year SEPTA's budget shortfall was \$45 million. This year it is \$62 million. If all we get this year is another band-aid, next year the budget shortfall will be even worse.

And, if we don't get even a band-aid, then we are facing a real catastrophe this year, one that will send the region into an economic depression; that will create record levels of unemployment; that will massively increase delays on our roads; that will worsen air pollution; that will make it difficult for schoolchildren to get to school; that will cut seniors and the disabled off from their family, friends and the cultural opportunities found in this wonderful region; that will make a mockery of our efforts to encourage tourism in the region. Without new, dedicated funding SEPTA won't have any choice but to adopt a plan that will devastate us.

You don't have to take SEPTA's word about all this. A group of transit activists have come together to create a new organization, the Philadelphia Transit Campaign (www.phillytransit.com). We have all been critics of SEPTA in the past. And, as soon as the funding crisis is over, we will be critics again, demanding that SEPTA restore cutbacks and improve service. Right now, however, we are working with SEPTA, with the Transit Workers and other unions, with businesses, and with civic, community, and religious groups to secure the dedicated funding for public transportation this region. For we have looked at the books, studied the budgets, and compared SEPTA to other transit organizations throughout the country. And we have come to a firm conclusion: SEPTA is underfunded. Without new dedicated funding from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, we will never have the public transportation system we vitally need in the Greater Philadelphia Region.

Everyone in the region must help secure that funding. The first step is to attend the hearings SEPTA has scheduled throughout the region. The next step is to write letters, make phone calls, and send emails to our state legislators and Governor Rendell, demanding action on dedicated funding before the current legislative session expires on November 30. Sample letters, mail and email addresses, and phone numbers for our legislators and the Governor can be found at our website www.phillytransit.com. A third step is to attend our next rally for public transportation in Harrisburg on Wednesday, November 10th. We will be providing free transportation for this trip. Go to our website for more information about the rally, about the transit funding crisis, or for additional ideas about what you can do to resolve it. Or you can send us an email at info@phillytransit.com or call us at 267-295-2040.

We face a fundamental choice: Without new dedicated funding for public transit, SEPTA will slowly collapse. With it, public transit will gradually improve, benefiting everyone who lives in the Greater Philadelphia region. Without dedicated funding, our increasingly moribund public transit system will strangle our communities. With it, public transit will make even greater contributions to the quality of life in our region: helping seniors and school children; serving workers and students; reducing pollution; and contributing to the economic and residential development we so much need.