

We Can't Afford to Flunk Transit

By Marc Stier

As a teacher, I know that review sessions are useful, so the end of an academic semester and calendar year is a good time for a review of public transit 101. A final exam is coming up soon, both for our political leaders and for us citizens. We all are in danger of failing.

Our semester's project has been to put pressure on our political leaders to make sure that there are no service reductions or fare increases at SEPTA. That means all of us should be contacting the leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties in Harrisburg, Gov. Rendell and Speaker of the House John Perzel, as well as our own legislators.

It is easy to find excuses for not doing our homework. SEPTA is an unloved course for most of us. It often is unresponsive both to low grades and constructive criticism. And, like any course we take day in and day out, we mostly remember the bad days. A SEPTA bus can be on time and be driven by a friendly driver 98 out of 100 days. But the two days we remember best are the one the bus was late and the one the driver was surly.

We have to look past our frustrations with SEPTA. We can take a seminar next year on improving public transit. Right now, though, the test is to find the subsidies to keep the system alive. For some, that also is a reason for inaction. Why should we support a transit agency that is always in the red?

The chief lesson of public transit 101 is that no transit agency can survive on the fare box alone. Just like other forms of transportation, public transit needs support from tax revenues. (Remember that the gas tax only pays part of the cost of our roads and bridges. It does not cover the costs of police, traffic and street lights, street cleaning, and snow removal.)

The economic reason for subsidizing public transit with tax revenues is similar to the economic reason for subsidizing education. Just as everyone benefits when some are educated, everyone benefits when some people take public transportation.

When people ride SEPTA pollution, traffic congestion, and road repairs are reduced. Public transit contributes to economic growth, job creation, and higher tax revenues. It increases the supply of workers and enables employers to find employees with needed skills. And it also allows students to attend the schools that best fit their needs.

So, whether we ride public transit or not, we benefit from it. Our assignment, then, is to encourage our public officials to find the funding SEPTA needs. Some of us already are coming to class -- about 5,000 citizens receive e-mail from the Philadelphia Transit Campaign (PTC), an organization of community activists working to improve the region's public transportation. You can improve our grade by coming to the PTC rally at the SEPTA board meeting at 3 p.m. today at 1234 Market St., Philadelphia. More of us need to show up for class, however, if we are to avoid a grade of C.

Our political leaders are not doing as well. Their task is to pass the legislation we need to give SEPTA the predictable, reliable, and dedicated funding it needs.

Until a few weeks ago, Gov. Rendell was often so late for class that he was in danger of failing. (If only he emulated the best student in the class, State Rep. Dwight Evans (D., Phila.), more often.) But, like one of those brilliant kids who goof off during the year only to do well in the end, the governor finally endorsed the kind of dedicated funding SEPTA needs.

The Republican leadership is seeking a grade of incomplete. The problem, however, is that funding public transit is a required course. An extension now would lead to devastating service reductions and fare increases.

Rep. Perzel is hoping to avoid an F by getting a note from the federal government. He wants Gov. Rendell to transfer -- or, in bureaucratese -- flex federal highway funds to SEPTA and Allegheny County's Port Authority.

Gov. Rendell thinks this is a bad way of to fund public transit. I agree. But, unless he has been working on an extra-credit project in secret, I don't see that the governor has any choice. That is why all of us who support public transit have to help both the governor and Speaker Perzel get a C this term. If we can induce Gov. Rendell to keep SEPTA alive until June, he and Speaker Perzel can retake the course next semester and, we hope, improve their grades.

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