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## Crass Transit



**Railroded: An R8 pulls out of Allens Lane full of passengers who might soon need alternate means of transportation.** Photo By: Michael T. Regan

### Riders are gearing up to fight SEPTA's proposed service cuts.

by [Daniel Brook](#)

On Friday afternoon, Center City resident Kathleen Brouwer was waiting at Market East station for her train to the airport. She was heading for a vacation in Arizona. When I asked her how she felt about the proposed closure of the airport line, she said she wasn't aware that a cut had even been proposed. The airport train, she said, "is really very convenient and affordable, so it's a shame." Groups gearing up to fight the cuts are hoping riders like Brouwer will be in the know soon, once they start making a ruckus.

"My position is no, you're not going to cut the R8, you're not going to cut the other rails either. It's completely unacceptable," says Tom Hutt, a Mount Airy resident and co-founder of the Northwest Campaign for Public Transportation (NCPT). Hutt says the newly formed group will use petitions, demonstrations and letter-writing campaigns to get the powers that be to come up with adequate transit funding. "I would expect that there would be [lobbying] trips to Harrisburg," Hutt says.

The proposed cuts are the result of the sluggish economy. Higher unemployment means fewer fare-paying commuters, so SEPTA is even further behind on covering its expenses -- and the Philly-haters in the statehouse who wouldn't even keep SEPTA funding in line with inflation during the flush 1990s aren't, as yet at least, willing to make up the difference. Faced with a shortfall, SEPTA has said it will have to cut all service on the airport line, the R8 to Chestnut Hill West, the R6 to Cynwyd and the R2 to Warminster as well as reducing service on many bus routes.

SEPTA spokesman Richard Maloney admits the cuts are "distasteful" and says, "we hate doing this," but maintains that under the current budget situation cuts are necessary. Maloney says his agency is lobbying for restored funding. Even top brass at SEPTA like Faye Moore, the general manager, admit the agency is worried about "the death spiral" -- when service falls to an inadequate level, people just stop using the system, which causes further revenue shortfalls and more cuts.

But despite SEPTA's claims, activists feel that the agency has not stepped up to the plate to help organize a coalition of riders, environmentalists and politicians that will be needed to apply pressure -- instead volunteers are left with the job. "They tell us that they're lobbying but we don't see any effort to put together a vocal coalition," says Hutt. At the NCPT's founding meeting last week at the Upsal R8 station, a SEPTA representative was in attendance but he merely explained how SEPTA had crunched its ridership numbers to determine which lines should be cut. His "spiel was just a bunch of b.s. as far as I was concerned," says Hutt.

Part of why activists and SEPTA leaders are not seeing eye to eye is a sneaking suspicion that SEPTA has singled out high-profile routes like the airport and R8 to spur popular outrage and win back funding. Suzanne Biemiller of the Chestnut Hill Business Association, a member of the NCPT, says she's not sure if the cuts are a political ploy but "if this



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ess. It's a pretty high-stakes game to be playing" with people's jobs

is the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, one of the business  
"More skeptical days, perhaps I would consider" that this were a political  
tactic. "I would nope not, for it represents the height of insensitivity."

The Rendell administration's defense of the cuts -- that a little budgetary pain now will lead to economic growth and higher state revenues in the future--is ironic considering the business community is leading the fight to save transit. For them, cutting the transit system would be shooting the Philadelphia economy in the foot. After all, Philadelphia's easily accessible downtown is just about the city's only advantage in the competition for jobs with Sun Belt cities like Charlotte and Atlanta.

Center City District executive director Paul Levy points out that 70 percent of Center City office workers get to work by transit. "More service and more frequent service, that's the direction we ought to be headed in," he says. "Both federal and state government need to provide support for mass transit in the same way they provide support for highways."

But Pennsylvania's state constitution bars any tax money related to automobiles (like the gas tax) from going to anything except highways.

As Bill Becker, an architect who commutes on the threatened R6 Cynwyd line, puts it, "As a region, if we cut back on our public transportation system, the ultimate cost of relying more and more heavily on the automobile will be borne by everyone and it will be higher." Worker productivity will be lost while commuters are stuck in traffic, health-care costs will rise as air pollution worsens, and the quality of life and economic viability of Center City will decline as it becomes one big parking lot.

The message from the neighborhood residents and the business community is clear. The argument about SEPTA's motivations can wait. Now is the time to fight.



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