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October 28-November 3, 2004

CITYSPACE

Bus Fuss



all aboard: Members of Young Involved Philadelphia say an improved, efficient transit system is key to moving the city ahead in the future. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

SEPTA needs to help Philly reach its potential.

by Gregory Heller

Close your eyes and imagine a Philadelphia with great mass transit. Imagine trains and buses arriving on time, friendly service, expanded routes and faster rides. And imagine there's a competent, efficient, visionary transit authority behind it all.

Within a few months, the commonwealth may finally give SEPTA its long-awaited dedicated funding. With this money, SEPTA will have the resources to fix its mistakes and provide better service for our forward-looking and growing city. The question is, will SEPTA have the initiative to use that money to give us the service we deserve?

SEPTA's service is currently marred by too-frequent late trains and buses, broken ticket and token machines and some of the highest fares in the nation. Regional rail and the subways don't run past midnight, and some bus lines have waits of up to an hour. Commuters are often left to fret over whether they will get to work on time. Every Friday and Saturday night, the city is flooded with cars filled with suburbanites driving into town and later as they return home because they have no other option. Beside them whiz an endless stream of taxicabs, filled with nighthawks and students who understandably don't want to wait half an hour or more for a bus.

SEPTA continually argues that it just doesn't have the money. However, the problem runs much deeper.

For ages SEPTA has been an unrelenting pessimist. SEPTA won't expand service because, it says, the riders aren't there. This is the old chicken-and-egg problem. But if you don't build it, you will never get the new riders and fares. For example, suburbanites currently drive into Center City on weekends by the thousands because there is no late-night service on the regional rails. But what if SEPTA provided 24-hour regional rail service—even once an hour, just on certain lines, and just on the weekends?

It works in other cities. Why not here?

At a recent Young Involved Philadelphia forum on transit, an excited audience of students and young professionals explained to SEPTA General Manager Faye Moor that there is much SEPTA could do to improve service for them, getting their fare money in the process. But Moore frowned and shot down the ideas one-by-one.

Moore spent the entire evening talking about what was not possible. She didn't mention the initiatives that SEPTA is already planning—a pay-per-ride card system, the reinstalled Route 15 trolley and Suburban Station's redevelopment. Had Moore talked about these exciting projects and been more responsive to constructive criticism, the forum participants would have gone home energized with a newfound support for SEPTA. Instead, they left angry and discouraged.

Philadelphians have come to view SEPTA as a naysaying, inefficient, unresponsive agency. SEPTA's systems and service are inadequate right now, and we should demand better. The central problem is that there are basic elements that simply don't work and need to be fixed. Specifically, SEPTA must:

- Provide working token machines in every subway station. If a machine is not available or is out of order, the employee behind the ticket window must sell tokens during all open hours.
- Run buses and subways more frequently during off-peak hours.
- Run 24-hour service on regional rail. For many, this is the primary public transportation method for the entire metropolitan area.
- Place bus stops every other block instead of every block. Few cities have as many stops as we have on our buses, and it slows service to a snail's pace.



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people and college students. Install shuttle buses that run between weekend nights.

ate new lines, respond to changes in neighborhood demographics and vision and creativity to expand ridership and improve service.

Philadelphia is America's fifth largest city, with one of the most important regional economies in the nation. We have world-renowned cultural and tourist attractions, restaurants and universities. We are one of the hottest cities in the country. We were voted by *Forbes Magazine* readers as the nation's No. 1 singles city last year and are currently being featured on MTV's popular *Real World* series.

If we want Philadelphia to continue to grow, we need a world-class transit authority. SEPTA needs to wake up and see itself as the transportation backbone of one of America's most important metropolitan areas. Come on SEPTA, take this money and get on board. With the momentum of Philadelphia and a forward-looking SEPTA, there's no telling how far this train can take us.

Gregory Heller is the Director of Planning for the Parkside Historic Preservation Corporation and a member of Young Involved Philadelphia.



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