

Transit Cuts: Coming Soon to a City Near You?

by Alexander Dow

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, we have long been accustomed to the head of our transit authority threatening to cut services and/or raise fares. Usually there's an outrage from the public against such cuts or increases which reaches all the way to our representatives in our state capital of Harrisburg. Usually state representatives come through with bailout money and the public is spared any substantial cut.

However, this time it was different. Our local politicians and the transit chief were telling us it was different. They were not going to ask for money from the state government. This time they were looking to cut expenses (and therefore services) and raise fares to "right size" the system.

Our school began to wonder how this proposal would affect our students. Our agency had

just invested in moving into a downtown building where public transit and student accessibility were major factors in determining our location. We had a transit authority pamphlet enlarged so our students could easily identify if their route was to be cut. We placed this poster board right in the entrance to our floor so it became an immediate conversation piece and helped to generate numerous discussions about the cuts.

Students and staff marked their routes. If a route they used regularly was scheduled to be eliminated, they were encouraged to contact the transit authority to let them know they opposed the change. We estimated that 20-30% of our students would no longer be able to attend classes by bus if the proposed cuts went through.

Articles from our local daily newspaper in-

American Public Transit Association Statistics

Using public transportation instead of private vehicles could reduce the average family's household expenses by \$6,200 a year, more than it spends on food.

Almost half of the nation's Fortune 500 companies, representing over \$2 trillion in annual revenue, are headquartered in America's transit-intensive metropolitan areas.

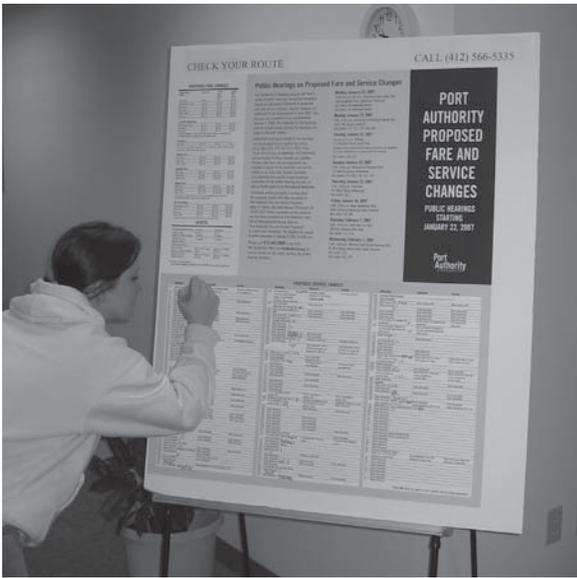
Every dollar taxpayers invest in public transportation generates an average of \$6 in economic returns.

Public transportation riders in the United States save 855 million gallons of gasoline per year compared to what they would consume by using private vehicles.

According to the National Safety Council's 2005-2006 "Injury Facts," riding a transit bus is 26 times safer than car travel. It is estimated that transit rail riders are 14 times safer than those traveling by car.

Source: <http://www.apta.com/>





A student at the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council acts to save the bus route that brings her to class.

spired teachable moments in the classroom. As information about the cuts developed, students and teachers learned valuable civics lessons about private vs. public funding, state/federal/local government responsibilities, and conflicting budget priorities. Students, staff, and volunteers received information about how to contact legislators to let them know their priorities and the importance of public transit in their lives.

We were also kept informed of rallies in support of public transit and taught how to testify at public hearings. As a result of this, for example, a group of students and staff gathered on a particularly harsh winter morning to rally and march in support of public transit. A staff member also testified at a hearing and spoke about the disastrous impacts transit cuts would have for programs like ours. Hearing him raised the interest of a writer from a weekly newspaper in doing a feature on one of our students who took public transit to our center. The student he interviewed spoke about his desire to move away from our city if these cuts occurred. Without his neighborhood route, he would have no access to classes or his job.

At the time of this writing, the state of public transit in Pittsburgh remains very much in jeopardy. Politicians and transit officials initially

presented a strong united front in favor of cuts, though the public reaction does seem to have had some influence. The proposed 25% cut in the system was modified to only 15%, saving numerous routes and neighborhoods from being without transit service. It remains to be seen how the situation will resolve itself. Hopefully the work of those who spoke out will convince officials that public transit is a necessity that can't be cavalierly cut to solve larger budget problems.

Alex Dow teaches at the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council.

Lesson Plan for "Transit Cuts"

Do you take public transportation? If there were no public transportation, how would you get to where you needed to go?

Do you think transportation such as buses and subways should be run by private companies for a profit or by the government? What would be some advantages and disadvantages of each method of ownership?

Budgeting: If you took the bus twice a week to classes and the base fare was \$1.75 for each trip, how much would you spend, on average, per month and per year? If the bus fare increased to \$2.00, how much more would it cost you per week and per year to get to class?

If a monthly bus pass costs \$60, how many trips (at \$1.75) would you need to take in order for it to be worth your money to get a bus pass?

Find out who your federal, state, and local representatives are. Contact each by mail, phone, or email and let them know where you stand on public funding for transit.