



Statement on Proposed Fiscal 2011 SEPTA Capital Budget

April 26, 2010

Because of the rejection of the Interstate 80 toll plan, the Pennsylvania transportation trust fund established by Act 44 in 2007 is facing a shortfall of hundreds of millions of dollars. Spending on necessary repairs and improvements to roads, bridges, and public transportation infrastructure will have to be postponed as a result. SEPTA faces a shortfall of 110 million dollars in fiscal 2011, which will grow in the following years unless a new funding source is found.

The funding shortfall jeopardizes many important projects, as detailed on page 25 of the proposed capital budget. Projects like substation improvements are necessary to maintain reliability of service and prevent costly emergency repairs. Other projects renew aging facilities like City Hall station and the Berridge Shop, and will reduce ongoing maintenance costs. And projects like the New Payment Technologies program and Elwyn to Wawa improvements enhance service and will attract new ridership and revenue.

This year, SEPTA has structured its budgets in such a way that the shortfall of Act 44 funds will not force service to be cut, and is not contributing to the need for a fare increase. As part of this plan, some funds that normally support the capital budget are being temporarily used for operating purposes. While this will cause some additional projects to be deferred, DVARP supports this strategy.

The elements remaining in the Fiscal 2011 Capital Budget are made up primarily of continuing commitments to projects already under way, such as the Silverliner V acquisition; projects required to comply with unfunded federal mandates, including positive train control systems for the railroad, and ADA accessibility projects at transit stations; and projects needed to keep vital operating infrastructure in a state of good repair. There is little room for further cuts without jeopardizing the safety and reliability of rail and transit service.

Therefore DVARP supports the proposed Fiscal 2011 Capital Budget. It is our hope that the legislature and the governor agree on a new transportation funding plan soon, so projects that have to be deferred for lack of funding can be advanced in Fiscal 2011. Many of these projects are ready to proceed, so investing in them now will create good jobs in engineering and construction fields while they make permanent improvements to SEPTA infrastructure. Furthermore, the present state of the economy is resulting in keener bidding for SEPTA contracts, so it will be more cost-effective to do this work now than to wait until later. SEPTA's ARRA-funded projects demonstrated how investing in public transportation can provide immediate economic stimulus while building for the future.

As we stated at the operating budget hearings, we are ready to ask our members to speak to their legislators on SEPTA's behalf as soon as a funding proposal is introduced in Harrisburg. If and when full funding is restored, we would like SEPTA to produce a supplemental capital budget for any additional projects to be advanced in Fiscal 2011, and to hold a public meeting and receive comments before that budget is adopted.

Silverliner V acquisition

We continue to monitor the Silverliner V acquisition closely, as this is the one capital project that will have the greatest impact on the quality of service SEPTA riders will experience. These cars are expected to be in service for 30 years or more, so it is essential that they be of the highest build quality. Weaknesses in body shell welding and assembly of interior parts now will lead to rattles and mechanical failures later. Compared to the mock-up shown last fall, we are much more satisfied with the construction and finish of the parts of the pilot cars we could see, but there is much we could not inspect, and we are relying on SEPTA staff to look everything over closely and not accept any inferior workmanship.

We oppose any changes to the cab configuration as specified in the original car design. There is no compelling reason for making a change, and the balance of safety considerations may in fact favor the original configuration. Meanwhile, changing the cab will add to the cost and delivery time of the cars. And while claims are that installation of a partition to enlarge the cab will require removal of only one seat, other seats will have to be reconfigured into facing pairs or fitted into a smaller space with less room for passengers. Either way, the effective seating capacity will be reduced: passengers refuse to take those cramped seats.

We suggested a retractable barrier as a means of providing space for additional personnel at the head end of the train without taking space away from passengers, and we are pleased with the arrangement as installed on the pilot cars. We recommend that the rest of the order be fitted with these barriers, which are inexpensive, reliable, and safe.

We support delivery of one car with the cab partition kit, for purposes of testing and validating the design, but we reiterate that if the cab is changed on the production cars, we will consider it evidence of mismanagement of the project and seek an outside investigation. The cab partition fitting should be thought of like the center door fitting of the Silverliner IVs; planning ahead for the possibility of significant changes to the railroad during the decades-long lifespan of the cars: in the Silverliner IV case, the possibility of installing high platforms systemwide; and in the Silverliner V case, the possibility of one-person operation at some date in the future.

In the event that the builder does not meet contract specifications for car weight and performance, and delivery date, they will be liable to SEPTA for liquidated damages per the contract terms. If such penalties are due, we insist that SEPTA make a full and public accounting for them instead of taking pennies on the dollar in a negotiated settlement.

New Payment Technologies

We continue to believe that advancing the New Payment Technologies project is of great strategic importance to SEPTA. Done right, it can make the system more convenient and increase ridership while reducing fare collection costs and increasing reliability of fare collection.

We commend John McGee and the other managers of this project for their willingness to discuss options with DVARP and other stakeholders. 'Buy-in' from the riders and their representatives will be important to the success of the project.

We are generally pleased with what we have seen so far regarding transit fare collection. An 'open model' payment system will greatly increase convenience for passengers who use SEPTA occasionally, and will reduce cash handled and speed boarding. Two critical policy decisions will need to be made prior to the final planning of this system: regarding transfers and passes. Effective with the launch of the new system, transit transfers should be made free of charge (except at fare zone boundaries) for all passengers using a prepaid farecard or registered

payment card. Once that happens, and completion of system installation, we will support elimination of paper transfers.

We also recommend that weekly and monthly passes be retained as part of the New Payment Technology system. While we recognize the economic arguments in favor of having all customers pay by the ride, with increasing discounts for more frequent riders, we think that other policy considerations outweigh those arguments. Abolishing passes will reduce ridership more than it increases revenue. Many passengers value the ability to make stopovers along their regular trip, and the convenience of being able to make additional trips for discretionary purposes. These trips are primarily made at off-peak hours, so the marginal cost to SEPTA of accommodating them is small. We will support reasonable restrictions to prevent abuse of the passes by messengers, students, and fare evaders.

We have serious concerns about some of the options being considered for the railroad implementation. A one-way fare collection system analogous to the Delaware River bridge tolls is attractive to SEPTA because inbound tickets would no longer have to be sold. However, with the degree of overlap between railroad and transit networks, riders could legally evade fares by riding transit outbound, just as drivers can legally evade bridge tolls by using a toll bridge in the free direction and a free bridge back into Pennsylvania.

We also have concerns about the proposal to control access to the Center City stations with faregates. While SEPTA has heeded our recommendation to assess whether such a plan could be safely implemented in the constrained spaces of 30th Street and Suburban Station, it will still be an inconvenience to riders.

We continue to believe that the best way to ensure that all fares are collected and to minimize or eliminate the cost of handling and accounting for on-board cash fares is to make reliable ticket vending machines available at every station. Technology continues to improve, even while costs are declining. The Parking Authority has just expanded its use of on-street vending machines which accept cash, smart cards, and ordinary credit cards and print receipts. They are inexpensive enough the PPA is installing two or three on every block, and they may be the best solution for SEPTA. Such machines would make prepaid tickets available to all riders and could be the basis of a future 'proof of payment' fare system.

We are not convinced that there is a unique subspecies of vandals and fare evaders in Philadelphia who would destroy SEPTA ticket machines or find ways to cheat the system. Self-service fares are working in South Jersey and elsewhere in the country, while SEPTA is one of the few, if not the only commuter rail system in America that is unable to make ticket vending machines work.

Comments on other specific projects

DVARP recommends that SEPTA replace a portion of the buses to be purchased with trackless trolleys, so routes 29 and 79 in South Philadelphia can be restored to clean, quiet, and energy-efficient trackless trolley service as soon as possible.

We support the track and right of way elements of the Infrastructure Safety Renewal Program, and urge SEPTA to establish communications with residents and businesses in affected neighborhoods well in advance of the project, to give them input into plans to mitigate disruption to the community while the construction projects are under way. We also recommend that SEPTA prepare a summary statement of passenger disruptions from proposed projects for the capital budget document: including the approximate time each project will be done, whether detours or substitute busing will be required, and other such information.

We commend SEPTA for designing the passenger shelter at Crestmont in a way it can be simply picked up and re-installed when the high platform there is built. We support the other station facilities project elements: they will improve passenger safety and convenience. Improvements to power systems are often not visible to passengers, but they are quite important to maintaining service reliability.

We support the parking expansion program, including the proposed parking garage at Jenkintown station. Garage opponents claim that the need for additional parking at Jenkintown can be mitigated by reducing train service there, increasing service on the branches, or providing more feeder transit routes. While we wish those alternatives were true or feasible, the fact of the matter is they aren't. The cost of increasing train frequency at the branch stations is prohibitive, the existing bus route feeding Jenkintown station is among the worst-performing, and cutting service at Jenkintown punishes local riders while making it much more difficult for passengers to make suburb-to-suburb trips. Each of these alternatives is less desirable than the garage project. And choosing not to build the parking facilities won't cause passengers to switch to more desirable modes of station access like buses, bicycling, and ride-sharing; it will crowd out local residents who want to use the station after 8:00 am and cause commuters to drive to Center City, or to park in residential neighborhoods when at-station parking isn't available.

While positive train control will enhance the safety of the railroad by preventing trains from passing stop signals, we have concerns with the implementation of signal technology at SEPTA. Some signal projects have resulted in slower service speeds, as they enforce braking points set for worst-case conditions. To the extent that slower service is less able to attract riders out of private cars, this worsens overall safety of the transportation system. Signal engineers should keep running time under consideration when designing these projects.

Likewise, we have concerns over the proposed positive train control system for the Media/Sharon Hill trolley lines. The communications-based train control system for the Subway-Surface Lines has so far caused more problems than it has solved. The system has caused frequent delays in trolley service, and contributes to bunching and overcrowding on the Subway-Surface Lines. While the longer headways of the Media/Sharon Hill system should pose less strain on the CBTC system, they also reduce the potential benefit of CBTC. SEPTA and its signal vendor should stay focused, and work out all the problems on the Subway-Surface Lines before extending this technology anywhere else on the system.

Bridge 0.35 carries the Chestnut Hill West line over the SEPTA main near 16th Street Junction. Before SEPTA proceeds to the design stage of this project, we recommend that planners study two alternative configurations.

1. Construct the "Swampoodle Connection" linking the Chestnut Hill West line to the ex-Reading half of the system as originally envisioned when the unified regional rail system was planned. This connection would reduce the train-miles SEPTA runs over Amtrak territory, reduce interference from Amtrak trains in scheduling and dispatching, balance ex-PRR and ex-Reading traffic and reduce non-revenue mileage, and give Chestnut Hill riders a faster trip to Suburban Station.
2. Use Bridge 0.35 as part of a jumpover allowing northbound trains to access Roberts Yard without having to cross over the southbound tracks. This would eliminate the daily backup of trains waiting to enter Roberts, and would save labor and other costs.

We commend SEPTA for continuing to make rail stations wheelchair-accessible after the designated Key Stations were completed. We agree with the decision to stage these projects as funding is made available. Retrofitting old subway stations for wheelchair accessibility is an extremely costly endeavor.

We support the Route 15 turnback at Delaware Avenue, which could become a key connecting link to a future waterfront light rail line, and link residents of the Girard Avenue corridor with waterfront jobs. We recommend that the branch cross Delaware Avenue and terminate on the east side, in the interest of pedestrian safety.

We support ongoing station renewal projects, and urge SEPTA to continue its efforts to communicate early and often with riders and neighbors who will be affected by these projects.