



Statement on Proposed DRPA Fare and Toll Increases and Capital Budget

July 22-23 2008

The Delaware Valley Association of Rail Passengers shares the concerns of many in the region that the Delaware River Port Authority has let non-transportation projects distract from its primary purpose of building and maintaining transportation facilities for the greater Philadelphia area. We believe that DRPA should call a moratorium on any further spending on such projects.

That said, DVARP recognizes that costs of maintaining and operating PATCO, the bridges, and other DRPA facilities have increased considerably since the last fare and toll increases. Therefore DVARP supports the proposed package of bridge toll and PATCO fare increases to be implemented in 2008 and 2010. Nobody wants to have to pay more, but a decrease in PATCO service or deferring maintenance on facilities would be worse for the region and its economy.

We oppose the plan to give DRPA carte blanche for inflationary increases in fares and tolls after 2010, though we have stated that smaller and more frequent fare increases are preferable to larger and less frequent ones. DRPA management should not be granted the power to hike fares and tolls without a hearing until it demonstrates that it can handle farepayers' money responsibly and not divert it to non-transportation projects. Also, in a time of high oil prices and increased concern for the environmental impact of driving, we don't think anyone can predict future circumstances well enough today to make policy decisions for the next decade. Finally, as you see tonight, fare and toll hearings provide a forum at which public concerns about the DRPA and its direction can be voiced. Retaining the public hearing process, even for incremental increases in fares and tolls, is in the public interest.

DVARP applauds the steps DRPA is taking towards congestion-based pricing. We particularly support the elimination of the commuter discount on the bridges. It was bad policy to give commuters who drive a considerable fare break while did not doing so for those who take PATCO; because mass transit is a much more efficient way to accommodate peak travel demand across the river. We found it especially perverse that the old policy actually resulted in DRPA paying drivers to take some trips, since the discount required a minimum number of trips. Implementing the policy change in three phases is an acceptable compromise, but regardless of the schedule, the discounts should be eliminated completely.

DVARP also supports elimination of the commercial vehicle discount. We support the changes to senior citizen toll policy. The object of the policy should be to facilitate mobility for medical and other essential trips for seniors, and to encourage seniors to travel at times when the bridges are less congested. Limiting discounts to off-peak periods and to a single round trip per day furthers these policy objectives and reduces the incentive for non-seniors to try and obtain the discount fraudulently. Senior citizens who find the new tolls to be too much of a burden can take PATCO or NJ Transit instead: the senior citizen fare is an excellent travel bargain.

The "Green Pass" is little more than a gimmick. We oppose it. Gas prices today and for the foreseeable future are high enough that people do not need an additional incentive to purchase more fuel-efficient cars. Meanwhile, hybrids and other so-called "green" vehicles contribute just as much to bridge and highway congestion as conventional cars. Giving them special treatment at the toll booth promotes the mistaken idea that hybrid cars will solve all our transportation and environmental problems.

The real green vehicles in the Delaware Valley are our public transit buses and especially trains. That's why we encourage DRPA to move forward promptly with plans to expand the PATCO system into Gloucester County and develop a rail transit system serving developing areas of the Philadelphia waterfront. In particular, we support the NJ-3 option using existing railroad right of way to bring PATCO service directly to communities like Gloucester City and Glassboro. Increases in the price of oil and concerns about America's energy security strengthen the case for NJ-3. It is the only option that will give passengers a direct trip to and from local businesses, schools and colleges, and other important travel destinations in South Jersey. Even if it costs more than the all-highway alignments, there will be better return on the public investment if the NJ-3 alternative is chosen. Finally, while we note that both the Philadelphia and New Jersey components of the transit expansion projects are budgeted simultaneously, we recommend that DRPA proceed with each on its own schedule, and not wait to design and construct them at the same time. Getting these projects up and running as soon as possible is more important than maintaining a perception of balance between Pennsylvania and New Jersey spending.