Public transit is a civil right, and a key strategy to combat climate change. A strong, just, & equitable transit system:
INTRODUCTION

The Philadelphia Transit Equity Day Coalition, in conjunction with the Labor Network for Sustainability national call for transit equity, formed to launch a series of events and activities to elevate Transit Equity Day beyond a day of action in Philadelphia. National Transit Equity Day honors the birthday of Rosa Parks (February 4), who in 1955 refused to give up her seat on the front of a bus as an act of civil disobedience against segregation. Her actions affirmed that everyone has a right to equal access on public transit.

We uphold Transit Equity Day as a day to elevate the message that public transit is a civil right, and a key strategy to combat climate change. The Philadelphia Transit Equity Day Coalition also honors the legacy and birthday of Octavius Catto (February 22), an educator, abolitionist, and civil rights advocate whose activism played a key role in desegregating Philadelphia’s horse drawn trolleys in the 1860s. The following is a short fact booklet that outlines our four goals for transit equity and facts that help tell the story for why we need these interventions in Philadelphia.

The Philadelphia Transit Equity Day Coalition represents local community, environmental and workers justice organizations including: the Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia, Clean Air Council, People’s Emergency Center, Philadelphia Climate Works, Philadelphia Unemployment Project, POWER, Sierra Club Ready for 100, 350 Philadelphia, 5th Square, Disabled in Action PA, Philly ADAPT, AARP Pennsylvania, & more.
AN EQUITABLE TRANSIT SYSTEM MUST CREATE & CONNECT PEOPLE TO GOOD JOBS

Philadelphia may be the largest poorest city, but the Philadelphia metropolitan region has some of the greatest resources, wealth, and opportunities to build a more equitable region. Creating an equitable region must include creating equitable access to job opportunities. Research shows that commute times are a significant factor for people's odds of escaping poverty. The longer the commute, the less chance people have in moving up the ladder. Very specifically, longer commutes often mean paying more in childcare costs. For shift and hourly workers, it often means an increased risk of being late, missing a work shift, or being fired. And, unsurprisingly, these disparities strike people of color in our region harder. Philadelphians of color commute six minutes more each way, nearly twelve more minutes each day, and over an extra hour more each week compared to white Philadelphians.

The Center for New Technology found that growing the number of suburban jobs centers accessible by a 30-minute transit ride by just 12% could make 4,700 more job opportunities accessible to people living in poverty in Philadelphia. Commute times are drastically different for people utilizing SEPTA alone compared to commuters with car access.

According to the Philadelphia Unemployment Project (PUP) Commuter Options program, only 24% of jobs in the Philadelphia region are accessible in less than 90 minutes by SEPTA, triple that of the average commute times for the city. This is mostly due to the majority of jobs being located in the suburbs. In 2012, nearly 42% of Philadelphia workers commuted to jobs in the suburbs, with 83% of them commuting by car. Since SEPTA was designed to bring suburbanites into the city and not vice versa, an expanded vanpool program that helps city residents access these often higher paying suburban jobs could combat poverty and cut down on vehicles with one person.

Source: PolicyLink/PERE National Equity Atlas
AN EQUITABLE TRANSIT SYSTEM MUST CREATE SOCIAL & RACIAL EQUITY

According to CONNECT, a report by the Philadelphia Office of Transportation, Infrastructure, and Sustainability (oTIS), “generational poverty and a long history of structural racism have a large effect on how Philadelphia’s transportation system meets the needs of residents, or in some cases, does not meet their needs. Our history of inequality influences how we approach issues around mobility, safety, gentrification, enforcement, funding, and engagement.”

PUP adds, “the city of Philadelphia’s poverty rate of 25.7% is the highest among the nation’s ten largest cities. Philadelphia also has the dubious distinction of being near the head of the pack, with the second-highest share of people in deep poverty.” With the increasing amount of jobs outside the city and low-income people living within the city, the spatial mismatch between unemployment, poverty, and jobs is currently solved by access to a car. Unfortunately, for city households below the median income ($37,460), 50% travel to work without a car. A strong and efficient transit system is needed to connect people to critical jobs and resources.

![Air pollution exposure index, by source: United States, Cancer and non-cancer, 2015](image)

In addition to transportation, we see the burden of structural racism show up through transit’s environmental impact. According to oTIS, over 50% of residents drive alone to work.

This leads to increased greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental pollutants that directly impact our health. For example, Black Philadelphians already have the most exposure to environmental toxins (from polluting facilities, for example), but also have the highest rates of pollution exposure from on-road mobile sources like cars, busses, and trucks. This also impacts Latinxs and Asian Pacific Islander communities, while White Philadelphians are impacted the least.
AN EQUITABLE TRANSIT SYSTEM MUST PROTECT OUR HEALTH & PLANET

Despite the fact that residents of color are more impacted by pollution, city residents as a whole are responsible for causing the least amount of greenhouse gas emissions. Research by the Center for Neighborhood and Technology (see map) shows that greenhouse gas emissions per household are much lower among city residents than our suburban neighbors. A main cause of this is suburban sprawl and the higher reliance on cars over public transit.

In order to protect a livable climate, we must move quickly to eliminate the emission of greenhouse gases from our trains, subways, trolleys, and buses, not just reduce those emissions.

According to research by 350 Philadelphia, SEPTA uses a lot of electricity: about the same amount of energy used by 48,000 Pennsylvania households. SEPTA is one of the largest energy users in our region and its choices have a real impact on the climate. Currently, SEPTA operates about 1,400 buses, with only 35 electric buses ordered and none currently in operation. SEPTA buses travel about 45 million miles each year, using more than 13 million gallons of diesel fuel.

Officials are considering plans to replace diesel buses and diesel-hybrid buses with electric buses over the next 20 years, but we need a faster transition. Several transit agencies in the U.S. have already unveiled plans to power their transit systems with renewable energy. Replacing these diesel buses will greatly reduce greenhouse emissions and toxic air pollution. It is imperative that the energy that powers electric buses comes from renewable sources and not polluting alternatives, like natural gas plants.
AN EQUITABLE TRANSIT SYSTEM MUST BE AFFORDABLE & RELIABLE

According to CONNECT, a report by the Philadelphia Office of Transportation, Infrastructure, and Sustainability (oTIS), “when transportation works well, it connects people to jobs and other opportunities, provides a civic space for us to interact with our neighbors, and is even enjoyable. When it does not work well it leaves people isolated from opportunity, stops us from building wealth, wastes our time, dirties our water and air, is a blight on our urban landscape, and even takes our lives.”

In Philadelphia, the average annual cost to own a vehicle is over $8,500. Yet the household median income is just over $39,000. White Philadelphians fare better, with a median household income over $56,000 compared to $32,000 for Black Philadelphians, $28,000 for Latinx Philadelphians and just over $44,000 for Asian/Pacific Islander communities. With 53% of Philadelphia residents already spending over 30% of their income on housing, owning a car is often out of reach, especially for low-income and people of color.

Public transit must be a viable and affordable alternative, and it also must be accessible and reliable. Due to the age of SEPTA’s subway, trolley and rail lines, there remains a critical gap when it comes to transit accessibility. Nearly sixteen percent of Philadelphians live with a disability, nearly 246,000 residents. The advocacy organization, Disability in Action estimates that nearly half rely on public transit. This is a limiting experience for too many Philadelphians. Elevators operate in 35 out of 52 stations, leaving a third of our stations inaccessible. Furthermore, five out of the six trolley lines are completely inaccessible to people with wheelchairs, while less than half of the Regional Rail stations meet accessibility requirements as well.
TRANSIT EQUITY DAY 2019 REVIEW

Following the completion of our community events in 2019, the Coalition continued to survey transit riders at transit stations and community events and compiled our findings.

Overall, the Transit Equity Coalition learned that respondents cared the most about the quality of SEPTA rides, the accessibility of service, and how much it costs.

In Phase 1 of our outreach we asked the following question (using large-scale birthday cards) to Philadelphians at several events and transit stops: “What do you think needs to change now to make public transportation fair for everyone in Philadelphia?”

In Phase 2, we used the categories that surfaced in Phase 1 to create a ‘SEPTA Wishlist’ for people to choose their top 5 priority areas for improvement.

- 56% of responses prioritize cleaner stations and vehicles
- 53% of responses prioritize buses, trains, and trolleys coming more often
- 51% of responses prioritize better physical accessibility
- 50% of responses prioritize free transfers
- 38% of responses prioritize better customer service at stops and stations
- 38% of responses prioritize clearer and more direct bus routes

When asked if free transfers and easier connections between lines would increase usage, 94.3% of respondents said yes.

The coalition was interested in understanding how people felt about traveling further to a SEPTA stop: 74.7% of respondents said they would be willing to walk between 1 and 10 additional blocks to arrive at a SEPTA stop.

From the 2019 surveying efforts, it’s clear that Philadelphians value having a clean, welcoming transit system that they can financially and physically access. Philadelphians want higher frequency, more reliable routes.