

Transit Stories

Tuesday November 16, 2021

Benjamin She

Philadelphia, PA

As a rider and advocate, I find transit in Philadelphia and using SEPTA to be liberating. First of all, the city, as a pre-war, very dense, and compact city, has an abundance of available transit through the subways, buses, and trolleys. It allows me to get to a bunch of different places for only \$2. I'm able to get anywhere within one transfer. Transit is not only beneficial to me, but also to many low-income workers and residents who have to rely on transit to access the amenities they need.

Pre pandemic, my workplace was outside the city of Philadelphia, around the King of Prussia area. I decided to live in the city because I have a network of friends and advocates here I want to continue to connect with. I forwent using a car in the city. Instead, I took SEPTA's train lines all the way out to the suburbs. These days, people of all income levels find that their workplaces are not necessarily very close to Center City anymore. Jobs are being spread out throughout this region to centers where it might not be the most accessible to transit.

Because of our history of transit and how it's always been split along political lines rather than sociological lines, reverse commuting has always faced a disconnect from transit agencies, including SEPTA, and how they view their suburban versus city-provided services. I considered taking the regional rail and then a separate bus to get to where I need to go, but I constantly found that it was always more expensive to take regional rail than to take suburban and city

rapid transit because the prices were way too high and service was too infrequent.

This is a common theme that we always see in which SEPTA and other agencies continue to run commuter rail as it were. It runs primarily as a nine-to-five service designed for white skewing commuters, rather than an all-day service that is integrated with true transit ridership patterns. Regional rail could provide a lot more, given how expensive it is and how frequent it really could be because of its infrastructure. There has to not only be an engineering improvement but a cultural shift in how transit is viewed in the suburbs.

People like me, the reverse commuters, are finding it increasingly difficult to sustain a work-life where we could have a good regional rail ride or we just have to give up and try again in some other location or some other job. All we want at the end of the day is just some foremost ability and the best, most efficient way to get from point A to point B. Agencies have to align these needs with policy which I think they can do if they recognize the service they can provide.

We have to be cognizant about how these reverse commuters are riders that still need to be considered and served in an adequate sense. Otherwise, the only alternative is to take a car and bring all the negative externalities of that.

(Continued...)



National Campaign for
Transit Justice

Transit Stories

We have to make sure that we continue to understand where our riders come from and why some of them are switching to cars or Uber and Lyft. They can't find transit reliable enough and frequent enough for them to ride.

SEPTA has been asked to do a lot in the past few years with a tentative and not secure funding environment. Operating costs get most of their money from the state and not from the local government. I think it's just very hard for an agency to respond to the needs of riders most directly and effectively if the riders don't feel empowered to have a voice in how their services run.

While the SEPTA workers, operators, and planners are doing an amazing job every day to try to get people where they need to be, I think we need that additional layer of support of really strong commitment from our elected officials in a lot of ways to make sure that transit isn't forgotten. Transit needs to be funded to the maximum possible extent in the present, but also within the future. Transit needs stable funding mechanisms, such as congestion pricing, and ways that directly speak to how we are going to have to adjust our commuting preferences, especially our non-car community.

transitjustice.org/transit-stories/benjamin-she

Transit Justice Principles

Abundant transit unlocks freedom of movement. But good transit is very scarce in the U.S. today. Americans Need Transit That Is ...

- **Equitable.** Transit investment must prioritize the needs of Black and brown people, people with low incomes, and people with disabilities.
- **Sustainable.** To avert severe climate change, models consistently show that some car trips must shift to transit.
- **Economically productive.** Better transit expands worker access to jobs, employer access to the workforce, customer access to businesses, and business access to a customer base.
- **Safe and accessible.** Transit investment should eliminate the full range of limitations and achieve broad-based safety and universal access.
- **Affordable.** Access to transit should never be contingent on one's ability to pay. Transit investment should establish programs that provide fare relief for everyone who needs it.

Every Tuesday, we will feature the first-hand experience of public transit riders from across the country in this short newsletter. From large cities to small towns, we will document the experiences of the millions of users of busses, trains, ferries and other forms of public transit in the US. Public transit is essential to our communities, to cooling the planet, to advancing equity. Transit is essential to our very lives.

This year there is a unique opportunity for the country to make an historic investment in public transit funding to help the country build back better. This story and all the others will be archived at transitjustice.org. For media inquiries, contact Doug Gordon, doug@upshiftstrategies.com.

TransitJustice.org

National Campaign for
Transit Justice