

RURAL = URBAN UNITY PROJECT

A case study with

TRANSIT FOR ALL PA!



INTRODUCTION TO THE RURAL-URBAN UNITY PROJECT

The Rural-Urban Unity Project uplifts stories of communities coming together across diverse geographies, races, and ethnicities to organize for shared solutions. Politicians and pundits have long peddled the idea that we are divided, especially by geography. A popular genre of political analysis (i.e. *White Rural Rage*, *The Left Behind*) that purports to explain the appeal of authoritarianism often reinforces this division. Election cycles feature tired tropes pitting “coastal elites” against working class folks of the Rust Belt or the Bible Belt, distracting people from their common interests and values.

In collaboration with a broad range of leading organizers across the country, Narrative Initiative has created a narrative working group focused on advancing democracy through rural-urban unity to challenge this divisive narrative. For a thriving multiracial democracy, we must focus on the common experiences that connect us, whether we are in a major metropolis or a small farming town. Our best hope comes from organizers who reject splitting our communities into unhelpful categories and embrace a vision where everyone thrives.

TRANSIT FOR ALL PA!



Individual experiences with public transit in Pennsylvania often feel very localized due to the numerous transit providers operating across the state. There are more than 35 separate transit systems in the state of Pennsylvania. The largest of them, SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority), is one of the biggest transit systems in the nation. Other systems include PRT (Pittsburgh Regional Transit) and CATA (Centre Area Transportation Authority), both of which operate in rural counties across the state. Each of these 35+ transit providers has its own budget and budget crises. But one small group of people in a rural area with a population of 6,000 doesn't have as much power to create change as a statewide coalition.

Transit for All PA! is a statewide coalition of transit riders, transit workers, and transit-supportive organizations and businesses, organizing to expand Pennsylvania's public transit systems and grow the state's economy, thereby connecting more Pennsylvanians to jobs, healthcare, and essential needs.

Transit for All PA! was founded in early 2021, when Pittsburghers for Public Transit convened a series of

statewide advocacy calls with the Amalgamated Transit Union, Philly Transit Riders Union, Clean Air Council, and Transit Forward Philadelphia to sound the alarm about the expiration of Act 89, which guaranteed dedicated transit funding in Pennsylvania. These calls brought together hundreds of riders and workers from all across the state.

Transit for All PA! has built a grassroots movement to win the policy solutions that fund critical transportation in rural and urban communities. It draws on the individual expertise of local activists and brings them together for statewide campaigns to win statewide solutions to local transit issues. Nearly 100 community organizations and businesses, 17 labor unions and labor councils, including eight different Pennsylvania locals of the Amalgamated Transit Union, which represents bus drivers in the state, and over 60 elected leaders have signed on to support Transit for All PA!'s platform.

The coalition has created a [policy platform](#) that put forward a series of values and legislative goals for the replacement of Act 89, including sustainable long-term funding for public transit that addresses the needs of Pennsylvanians in both urban and rural areas.

Disabled Organizers and Civic Participation: A New Narrative for Public Transit

“We’re all just one life experience or incident from becoming disabled, and we all hope to live long enough to need different ways of getting around. The average American outlives their ability to drive by 7 to 10 years. We’re all temporarily able-bodied people. So what’s our plan for ourselves, our parents, and our kids?” –Samantha Pearson, PA, WalkWorks

Across America, [30 percent of the population does not drive](#) – due to age or disabilities that [preclude driving](#). According to [AAA](#), the average American outlives their ability to drive by 7 to 10 years, meaning that almost everyone who lives long enough will need to rely on public transit. With a rapidly aging population, there will be more than 70 million Americans aged 65 and older by 2030.

Meanwhile, there are an estimated [61 million disabled adults](#) in the United States – more than one in four adults live with one or more disabilities. Experts warn that these estimates don’t account for the widespread disabling impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the [U.S. Social Security Administration](#), the average American who turned 20 in 2022 has a 25 percent chance of becoming disabled enough to need to draw on social security benefits before the age of retirement. Disabled people also face double the rate of poverty as nondisabled people, according

to the [Century Foundation](#). Racial injustice compounds disability injustice; disabled people of color experience higher rates of poverty than their white peers.

Public services allow disabled people, in substantive, everyday ways, to be part of the public. Disabled people rely on public transit in every aspect of their lives, from getting to doctor appointments, grocery shopping, visiting family, and getting to work, school, or vocational training. People with one or more disabilities often require multiple forms of support to live with dignity, including accommodations at work or school, accessible housing, home care services, transit, or a combination of these. If any one form of essential support crumbles, including transit, disabled people lose access to their communities and can no longer meet their needs.

One of Transit for All PA!’s most significant narrative interventions was to bring a disability justice lens into the conversation on public transit. By bringing organizers with disabilities into leadership roles into their base, the campaign amplified the experiences of disabled riders and made more urgent the need for public transit in both urban and rural areas of Pennsylvania. Their organizers also highlight the importance of public transit to civic engagement, including voting.



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The coalition has empowered local transit activists to tell their stories and has created a database of individual stories about public transit across the state.

If a policymaker claims public transit is not a problem in their community, Transit for All PA! can turn to their storytellers to share their real experiences. They draw upon their trusted networks to identify trusted spokespeople, including locals of the Amalgamated Transit Union all across the state, who can help identify the right people to tell a specific story from a particular area - the people to whom state and local elected leader will listen closest.

“Public transit is one of the main underpinnings of my success and my career. I received services from the Commonwealth to help me get the training I needed as a blind person to use technology, read Braille, and use a white cane. The government invested in me by providing services, and as a result, I’ve been able to work, attend school, get married, own a home, and participate in my community. Transit is essential to all of that.” -Lou Diehl, disabled transit activist from Lower Paxton Township, PA

Lou Diehl is a blind transit activist who resides in Lower Paxton Township, approximately 10 miles outside the capital of Harrisburg. He moved to the area for work opportunities because the town provided accessible transit, allowing him to advance his career and attend social events. Lou received support services while in graduate school, allowing him to pursue his career. He views those services as an investment in his future economic participation, with the return on investment received by the state through the income taxes he pays from his resulting career. For Diehl, transit is an investment with a

high rate of return for the government because transit allows people with disabilities to participate in the economy.

“I am a person with many disabilities. I can’t see very well. I got hit by a car and I cannot walk very well. I’m partially paralyzed. I get seizures frequently. I fall asleep all the time because I’m suspected of being narcoleptic. So public transit is a lifeline issue for me.” -Alex Casper, disabled transit activist from northcentral Pennsylvania

Alex Casper is a disabled transit rider and activist who lives in northcentral Pennsylvania, in an area with a significant number of disabled residents and where more than 20 percent of the population is elderly. In the region where Alex lives, residents face systemic barriers to accessing economic opportunities and rely on transit to commute to work, attend doctors’ appointments, and purchase groceries. Those without disability subsidies can easily spend \$50 or more on Uber or taxis just to get to work or make a doctor’s appointment. He became active in Transit for All PA! because he saw that his rural area wasn’t mobilized, and he worried about the impact of transit cuts on his community, including on rural hospitals and healthcare facilities.

Alex views his transit activism through the lens of [Gustavo Gutierrez](#)’s teachings. Gutierrez is the father of liberation theology, whose teachings Alex understands as, “If we want people to go to church, we need to make sure that there’s a bus that takes them to church. If we want people to go to work, we need there to be a bus that takes them to work. If we want people to get healthcare and heal, we need to make sure there is a bus to take them.”



On the Right Track: Transit for All PA!'s Push for Investment in Public Transit

In 2024, Transit for All PA! successfully organized for and won a one-time infusion of cash for their state's transit agencies to stave off collapse. Most notably, they additionally won federal highway flex money for public transit through an executive order from Governor Shapiro – a campaign that they took from zero to completion over the course of just ten days.

Transit for All PA! believes that its power comes from organizing everyday transit riders and neighbors to speak up for improving transit in their communities. To provide capacity to transit riders outside of Pittsburgh and Philly who are fighting for their systems, Transit for All PA! launched its "[Small Systems Working Group](#)" in early 2025. This working group has met monthly and successfully mobilized supporters in every single PA Legislative District across the state. T4APA's Small Systems Working Group has been unrelenting in building the narrative that public transit is a core issue that impacts rural communities, just as much as urban ones.

On June 7, 2025, Transit for All PA! held a lobby day, pushing state lawmakers to increase public transit funding for every county in PA. Transit riders from across the state shared their personal stories with lawmakers, visiting every legislator's office and hosting eight in-person meetings with constituents from those legislators' districts. Without a dedicated funding source from the state, all 35+ transit systems face the uncertainty of cuts and fare hikes. In Philadelphia, SEPTA needs to close a \$200-plus million deficit after funds from the American Rescue Plan ran dry – funds that Transit for All PA! successfully campaigned to use for preserving service during and after the pandemic. The transit agency is now proposing a 40 percent reduction in services, including the elimination of 50 bus routes and five regional rail lines. Transit for All PA! keeps track of threats that smaller, rural systems face [due to lack of dedicated state funding in their blog](#).

Most recently, on August 10, 2025, Transit for All PA! successfully campaigned for the Pennsylvania House of Representatives to pass HB 1788, the fifth such transit funding measure passed in a bipartisan manner by that body. The bill would invest nearly [\\$300 million into mass transit funding for all 67 counties in the state](#). It serves as the first part of the [Transit for All PA!](#) legislative package to provide 'dedicated, reliable money' for public transit, after policymakers proposed privatizing bus services run by SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority), and now have forced agencies to steal from their capital budgets to fund operations. Named after the coalition that fought for it, the set of bills represents the culmination of years of organizing by Transit For All PA!. The two State Senate sponsors of the package, Nikil Saval of Philadelphia and Lindsey Williams of Pittsburgh, have signed onto Transit For All PA!'s [platform](#), alongside many others from districts across the state.

In September, Transit for All PA! submitted [written testimony](#) for the Senate Transportation Committee Hearings, highlighting their legislative platform. Previously, Transit for All PA! won its campaign to use American Rescue Plan funding to preserve transit service across Pennsylvania.

In this moment, the state of Pennsylvania has gone more than three months past its deadline in passing a state budget. But thanks to the organizing of Transit For All PA!, transit has become the most animating issue of the budget season, with legislators stating it as the most they have been contacted about any issue. And the pressure has not let up, with recent and future rallies, op-eds, and canvassing scheduled in Lancaster, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Allentown, and Bradford. Direct service cuts have been successfully avoided in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia due to flexed capital funds, but every other agency in PA still stands on the precipice, and no elected official is hearing the end of it.

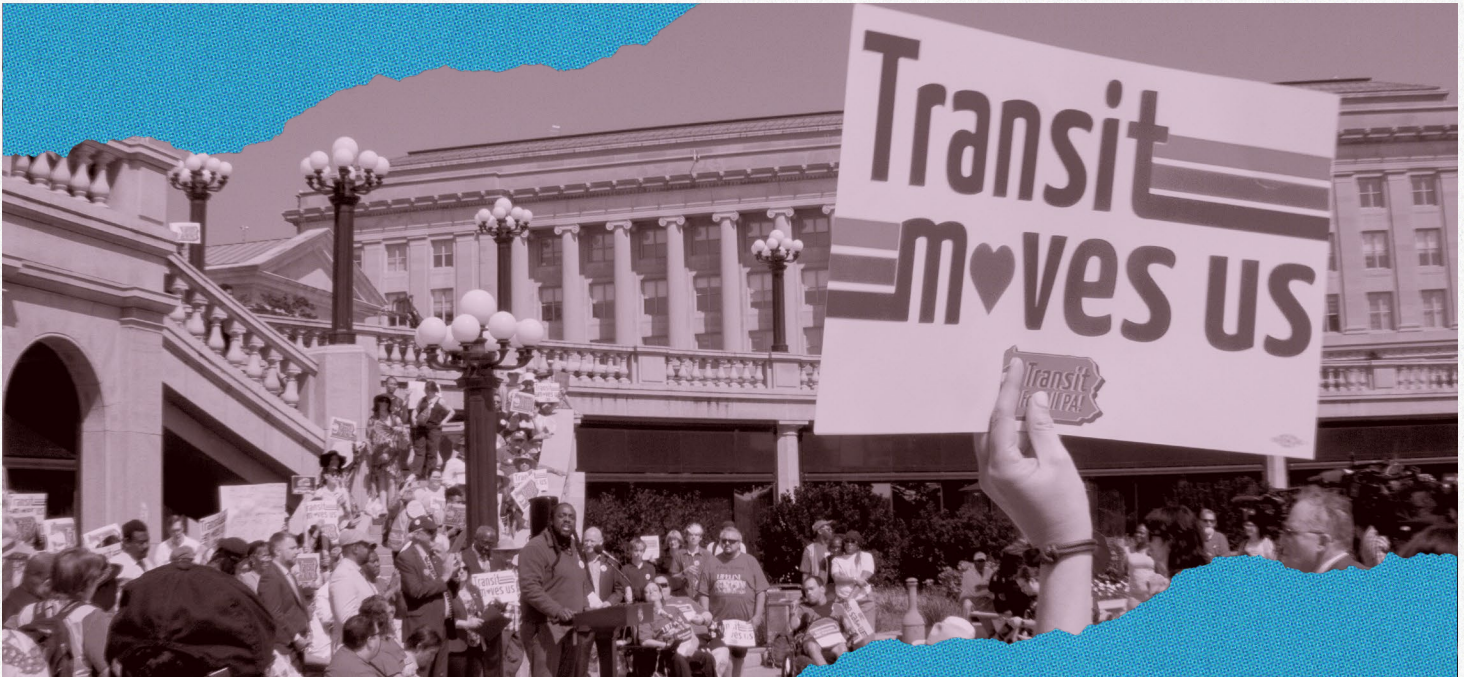


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As a Black woman, I've never seen democracy without people power. That's heightened for more folks now, but for us, this is nothing new under the sun. And organizing to me means people power. No matter who is in office, they can't cut our spirit, our pride, our empathy, our compassion, our drive. Organizing together and showing our people power is how we live democracy.



The Future of Public Transit in Pennsylvania



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When a section of Interstate 95 collapsed in Philadelphia, local and state elected leaders came together to do whatever it took to get it fixed and reopened in just [two weeks](#). That portion of I-95 serves [approximately 160,000 cars](#) daily. Meanwhile, there are [approximately 800,000 public transit trips](#) made daily in the same region. SEPTA cuts, therefore, could have more than four times the impact of the I-95 collapse – every single day.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania hasn’t legislated public transit funding for more than a decade, when it passed Act 89 with bipartisan support, which sunset in 2022. Transit funding has remained stagnant while costs continue to rise – from fuel to liability insurance to labor. No transit system can continue to provide the same level of services in 2025 with a budget that hasn’t increased since 2011. That means that just maintaining current levels of funding won’t be enough to protect public transit – increases in funding are urgently needed just to keep transit services at current levels. Southeastern Pennsylvania accounts for more than 40 percent of the state’s economic activity, so transit cuts there could potentially collapse the state’s economy. Proposed cuts could mean erasing 50 bus routes and five regional trail

lines. Meanwhile, in 2026, Philadelphia is going to host the semiquincentennial celebrations of the United States, the FIFA World Cup, and the Major League All-Star Games. It would mean zero train service for the region after 9 PM, with no special services for 100,000-person events that take place at the sports complex.

Transit for All PA! mobilized for rapid and successful campaigns because of their incredibly broad base. They activated more than 30,000 people to take action, and their movement has now grown to 41,000+ riders and workers across Pennsylvania. Thanks to their organizing, the governor’s 2026 proposed budget included a provision that would increase the percentage of the state’s existing sales tax that goes to public transit from 4.4% to 6.15%, increasing funding for public transit to a total of \$1.5 billion over the next five years, without any increase in taxes. But the fight is not over. Recently, policymakers opted to use capital funds to avoid a shortfall for SEPTA, removing the contentious set of bills on public transit from the budget.

Transit for All PA!’s organizing strategy brought rural and urban communities of those most affected by transit cuts into the policy conversation — and brought their bigger vision for a public transit that serves everyone closer to reality.

The case study highlights the work and policy impacts achieved by a group in Pennsylvania to support public transit access across the rural-urban divide. Narrative Initiative did not engage in the advocacy activity discussed below.