

# Pittsburgh's Transit System: History, Opportunity, Challenge

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Like many public transit systems in the United States, Pittsburgh's public transit system has consistently adapted to its target population's changing needs and demographics. Some of these changes have been positive; some have dramatically affected the frequency and quality of service. The system and the city have implemented solutions—largely with good intentions—to address the issues. Nevertheless, disruptions and problems with access have made the system inaccessible or downright unreliable for many users. While many methods and innovations in public transit could potentially be utilized in Pittsburgh, to do so, transit stakeholders would need to overcome some significant barriers around terrain, cost, and population.

Given the realities of demographic change, climate disruptions, and the transition from America's overreliance on fossil fuels, public transit in Pittsburgh could be a vital component of the future growth and development of the city. To best provide for that future, public officials and transit experts should prioritize the needs of the region's low- and middle-income residents, improving access to high-volume transit corridors and improving access and frequency of buses to far-flung suburbs within the region. This allows issues such as long wait times, frequency issues, Buses and T routes going out of service, and having entire bus lines go out of service to be addressed and fixed.

This paper examines the transit history of Pittsburgh and the US to lay out a foundation for what has already happened and what has been done to address issues that were faced at that time. Then, it dives into the issues faced in Pittsburgh that have occurred recently. Following this appraisal, it surveys what has already been done to address these issues and offers proposals for what needs to happen to improve the system further. Finally, it goes over arguments for and against some of the solutions to the issues at hand, while leading to a definitive conclusion to the problems faced and the right course of action to address and fix them.

## **US History of Transit**

At one point in American history, the nation was home to transit that was the world's envy. However, due to many factors, transit in America took a considerable downturn while other nations continued progressing. The diminishment of transit in America spread gradually, leaving many Americans with only one option, a personal vehicle, for their transportation needs. This was a failure largely of urban planning, which prioritized the construction of huge highway systems and spread-out suburbs over the needs and wants of more densely populated urban areas. (English 2018), Jonathan English, a journalist for Bloomberg, emphasizes that “service drives demand” and not the other way around (English 2018).

Political officials have tried to address the supply issue, but they are not able to overcome the resistance of more-rural communities, who do not have much interest in public transit issues. The result has been transit systems in America that are overburdened and stretched beyond their capacity or usefulness. According to English, in order to be successful, transit systems need to have frequencies of 15 minutes or less—this time interval is frequent enough that people do not have to rely on a schedule. As English notes, “however, this is nothing like the reality in most American cities, where a 30-minute standard is more appropriate.” (English 2018).

The United States has some significant liabilities compared to cities in Europe or Asia. However, While many of the urban areas on those continents were developed before automobiles, much of America's urban landscape was built around and in service to cars. This has led to the serious problem of lack of density, when looking at public transit in this country. Transit can be more like the ones seen in those urban areas on those continents, but it will never be identical. (Edwards, Cudmore, and English, 2018)

American citizens favor the car over public transit because of its ease of use and quickness compared to transit. Only 50% of Americans use public transit once a week. Also, most trips made by Americans are made by car (Wilson 2022). The lack of investment is also a critical issue in many American cities. Most government and state funds are allocated to other public goods and services. Moreover, with the bit of funding set aside for infrastructure, transit can be paid attention to and invested in, leading to crumbling and insufficient infrastructure issues being solved. These issues can lead to longer wait times and cancellations. (Wilson 2022)

With few outside funding sources, transit relies on fares collected from its riders, which has yet to prove sufficient to keep the system afloat. Transit typically does better when the system has funding from its government rather than the people riding it. This issue has led to higher ticket and fare costs to the rider, which can affect lower and middle-income recipients (Wilson 2022).

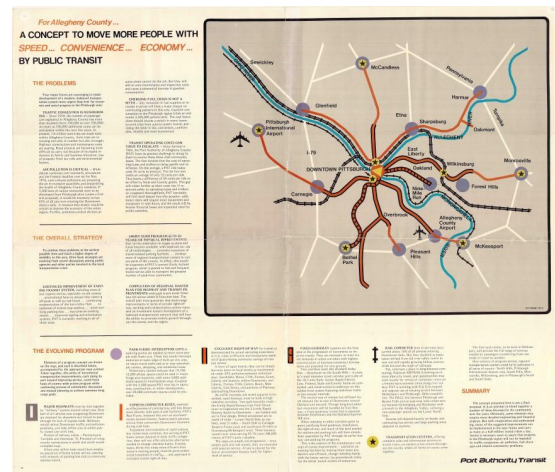
Another issue that faces transit that can lead to longer wait times and frequency issues is traffic. Transit systems are usually integrated with the rest of the city, where there is heavy traffic, instead of separating it from the traffic. Separating transit traffic from general traffic allows modes of transit to bypass crowded areas quickly and effectively increases frequencies and reduces wait times (Wilson 2022). Unfortunately, traffic is a given due to most work and school opportunities being in one area, and traffic is inevitable when everyone goes to the same area at once. ("5 Transportation Issues & Solutions for Cities" 2021)

In turn, with a lack of investment, maintaining a worthy transit fleet is high in cost for maintenance and labor. Recent higher fuel prices represent at least 60% of what is used to maintain a fleet. The cost gain gets passed down to the consumer, which can make the fare even higher, further affecting lower and middle-income people ("5 Transportation Issues & Solutions for Cities" 2021).

American car-dependent urban sprawl is another issue because it causes transit lines to go far outside the city center, which worsens the wait times, frequencies, maintenance, and cost problems because of the larger area that the line and mode of transit have to cover. The issue affects small and large cities of all kinds, as well. Cities have to run lines of transit to very low-populated and low-traffic areas to connect them to the city center, which is difficult because it is far from the city ("5 Transportation Issues & Solutions for Cities" 2021).

## Pittsburgh's history of transit

Given these realities facing cities throughout America, it seems clear that the challenges faced by Pittsburgh are regional variations on national trends. Pittsburgh was the 17th largest city in the United States in 1859 and the heart of the industrial force for the country. The Port Authority reports that people usually lived nearby where they worked. The city overall was limited to how far a person could walk. The need to expand travel beyond foot led to horse-drawn carriages, the first form of transit implemented in Pittsburgh. (Blackley and Krauss 2018)



With the implementation of transit came the ability for people to live and work in neighborhoods they want to. As technology advanced, so did the transit modes—from horses to cable cars to electric street cars. By the dawn of the twentieth century, Pittsburgh would have an extensive trolley system running through its street—complete with funiculars to travel the city's steep hillsides—as it expanded and annexed other areas. (Blackley and Krauss 2018).

Over time, things began to change as Pittsburgh started implementing a city-planning approach that was car-oriented and contributed to suburban sprawl. Trolley ridership peaked in 1920 (Blackley and Krauss 2018). Also, the city's population peaked at 588,343 during this time, after which it began to decline precipitously (Blackley and Krauss 2018). As ridership fell, Pittsburgh's citizens started to favor a car commute rather than a commute by public transit (Blackley and Krauss 2018). This trend persisted because people found driving easier than public transit, primarily due to the city's expanding infrastructure being geared towards suburbanization.

Problems soon arose, and by 1950, 33 regional rail companies were operating independently in Pittsburgh. At the time, there were many complaints about needing to simplify the payment of fares between all the systems and rising tensions between the various transit services around potential riders and stops. Eventually, the city combined all the companies to make the Port Authority of Pittsburgh. This helped solve the immediate issue, though consolidation would soon present its own challenges. (Blackley and Krauss 2018)

Between the 1980-the 90s, Port Authority stopped using street cars and switched to buses because of cost and repair issues. They also decided to keep the light rails that ran through the south hills, because there would be no need for a south parkway. The rails would serve a bustling and congested corridor and reduce traffic. On the other hand, while a light rail system was maintained in the south hills, the Port Authority opted to use dedicated busway routes in other parts of the area. The east busway was completed in 1983, with others running through the city and region. This was the general implementation of light rail and BRT in Pittsburgh which is seen today(Blackley and Krauss 2018).

### **Issues that Pittsburgh Faces**

Pennsylvania's state funding for Transportation is relatively similar to the funding budget from the Federal government to the country, which is only 6.5% of the entire

budget (Schoen 2012). The seven billion dollars in funding is only a tiny fraction of what is spent overall in the state's budget. (Chantrill, n.d.)

The cost of operating and maintaining the system still needs to be addressed. Pittsburgh plans to go all-electric by 2045, costing the city and PRT 572.2 million dollars. The most difficult part of this ambition is that there is no more federal funding for fleet diversification. However, attempts have been made to implement electric-powered modes of transport, but it has all led to the buses collecting dust in the garage. (Hennen and Sheng 2022)

Lack of investment in infrastructure has led to the collapse of a bridge with a bus line on it and a whole bus falling into the ground in recent years. These incidents led to frequency, wait time, and redirecting route issues that persisted for some time. The bridge collapse Ironically happened when President Biden came to give a speech on his infrastructure bill in Pittsburgh (Guza and LaRussa 2019).

Overall, the bus service in Pittsburgh is lacking and is plagued by delays, cancellations, and over poor service. Recently, in the past year, numerous layoffs occurred due to the COVID-19 vaccine mandate in an attempt to protect public health. This event contributed to current problems, such as delays, wait time, and frequency issues. This has led to people taking the bus to outlying suburbs and finding themselves stranded because the bus has yet to come back to get them, forcing them to rely on pricey ride-share services. PRT claims that they are currently hiring and retaining people as they are reporting on the situation. (Hoffman 2022).

Despite everything, Pittsburgh has invested way more money into ride-share services, E-scooters, and bikes. This was done with good intentions of increasing mobility around the cities and making them more like extensions to the currently in-place transit system. However, this heavy reliance over time was found not to help transit, and it also ignored the disabled and the financially pressed citizens that need transit the most. The action did not address any of the issues we see today that hurt

PRT (Port Authority). Yes, it is good for the city to have this type of transit, but it must also focus on the people who need it most. As Koscinski observes, “Scooters do nothing to fill transit gaps for those who can’t ride them. This includes those with balance or vision impairments, wheelchair needs or those above a certain weight. He goes on to note that “low-income residents are often priced out of using micro-transit options like electric scooters, which cost nearly \$5 for a one-mile trip. Port Authority bus fare is almost half the price” (Koscinski 2022).

### **The present (and Future) of Public Transit in Pittsburgh**

Despite the reckless investment in ride-share, E-scooters, and Bikes, Pittsburgh and some organizations have done things to improve the system and address the problems that hurt the system and its riders.

PRT decided to start adding more stops to the East Bus way (a form of bus rapid transit) (BRT), allowing more access and getting people from more areas to their destinations much quicker. This allows untouched areas around the busway to have better access to it. They also look forward to adding more Transit Oriented Development (TOD) around these new stops to improve ease of access, frequency, and wait times (Felton 2022).

Also, in encouraging news for Pittsburgh PRT and its relationship to transit-oriented development: PRT announced that Allegheny County received funding from the federal government for extensions of the East Bus way out towards east Pittsburgh and further into Mon Valley. These ideas and incentives, though, are only in the planning stage, says Adam Brandolph. (Deto 2022) This news shows that Pittsburgh is finally attempting to address the pressing issues of lack of access and long wait times. This revelation can also be seen as a push for more funding from the government which allows things like this to happen, which is good.



PPT Transit Union, which fights for users of public transit in the city of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. To have their voices heard and have changes implemented. PPT recently passed a pilot program to give low- and middle-income disabled persons a free or reduced-fare bus pass. Also, to conduct research for future legislative implementations and other studies. ("PPT Wins Prestigious National Award for Low-Income Fare Campaign," 2022) what they are doing addresses the fare cost and prioritizes the lower and middle-income riders and disabled persons. This is also a changing public option for a certain demographic of people, which will further drive funding which in turn can increase service, which increases ridership.

Active network and corridor planning projects (Next Transit) Pittsburgh has a list of all the current and future projects they have in the making. It mainly includes expansions and many more add-ons to our existing system. The plans that are being made have input from the public and are planned to be implemented by 2045. ("PRT (NEXT Transit)," n.d.) The plan is a sign that PRT has Pittsburgh's future in mind and that they are taking note of the things that need to be done to further support Pittsburgh.

Another ideal solution is to start investing more into the system from a federal and state level. Doing so will allow transit companies not to have to rely on fare collection alone. Doing this will address every issue that America and Pittsburgh face that was mentioned previously. More funding allows service to be significantly improved, driving demand, improving fare prices, and even making Transit free one day. The overall idea is supported by Blackley and English explored above.

Making transit more appealing to people by giving more additional options and services will significantly increase the ridership and quality of transit. Doing this will also ease the average American from relying on a car to get around to using transit, reducing congestion from private cars and improving economic mobility. (Wilson 2022)

Overall, most of Pittsburgh's actions have directly addressed all of these issues adequately and reasonably, but the problem is that more should be done to solve the

issues for good and even eliminate them definitely. A more permanent solution to the problem is increasing the budget from taxes locally and on the state level. The reason is that without funding, PRT cannot do everything that was planned to be done. If there was no funding, you could not expand or add to busways or implement pilot programs or hire workers. Increasing the budget will allow Pittsburgh to do all these things but also do more on top of what they already do. Increasing the budget will allow transit to prosper as it did back then. The interstate system prospers because it has millions upon millions of dollars in funding compared to public transit. This can also be related to English, where he mentions service drives demand. More funding can lead to more services being provided, where the demand will increase. It is all directly correlated.

Also, changing the American mindset around public transit will allow this to happen because if people start to demand that their tax dollars be put towards better transit options then in turn lawmakers will follow accordingly. Changing the American mindset by simply improving on transit options will allow transit to prosper.

## **Conclusion**

Car-oriented suburban sprawl and decreased funding have, over time, changed American perception and reliance on public transit. And as seen, things have been done to address this. Many aspects of an excellent public transit system have been seen being utilized in Pittsburgh, such as light rail and buses, and PRT. Yet to provide for future and current citizens of Pittsburgh, the city needs to prioritize the needs of the region's low- and middle-income residents, improving access to high-volume transit corridors, and improving access and frequency to far-flung suburbs within the region. This in turn, solves issues such as long wait times, frequency issues, modes of transport going out of service, and having entire bus lines go out of service to be addressed and fixed. The best course of action to do this is by changing America's perception of public transit and increasing the budget for public transit and not having all the funding come from fares alone. These proposals are the best because they are the steps that can be easily implemented today with little concern for time and money.

Increasing the budget will allow transit companies to plan and provide accordingly for their region, while changing public opinion will drive the push to get more funding for these companies.

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