

Public Transit Solutions for Rhode Island

Four steps to make riding public transit more desirable

Policy Recommendations from the New Public Transit Alliance

Thousands of Rhode Islanders depend upon public transportation to get to and from work, medical appointments, visits with friends and family, and trips to supermarkets, entertainment venues, and schools. The overall benefit of public transit to society is extensive. Certainly, people who use it get the benefit of low-cost transportation while reducing traffic and the demand for parking.

Transit also greatly benefits the environment. In New England, cars and trucks are responsible for 37 percent of the region's global warming pollution making the transportation sector the number one cause of global warming in the region. By getting people out of cars, global warming pollution and smog are reduced, improving air quality. Further, transit-oriented development encourages dense, walk-able communities over sprawling, exurban development and allows for the protection of open space, an increasingly rare resource in Rhode Island. Strong transit helps our core cities survive, helping to stem the export of dollars to out of state oil producers and refiners.

However, a recent report from the RI Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC) anticipates deficits of \$4-10 million a year for the foreseeable future, as the growth in gas tax revenue that supports RIPTA cannot keep up with expenses. This in turn can erode the system: fares are hiked, and routes are cut or reduced, which only leads to a loss of riders, and further cuts. This ongoing saga of deficits and cuts will only deliver Rhode Island a crippled public transit system.

Planners and policy makers speak often about becoming more creative about funding public transit in Rhode Island. Many have suggested using Tax Increment Financing (TIF) as one means of creative funding sources. NuPTA could support TIF financing of local transit projects like suggestions for a Valley Street line or Allens Avenue line. But we believe that the developers who see the benefit of investments like these should share the risk, and TIF bonds that leave the city responsible in the event that adequate revenue to service them does not materialize are fundamentally unsound investments for a city to make. We also believe that transit improvements should first serve the businesses and residents who are already there. An Allens Avenue line should be a way for people to come to work at the Pro-Met shipyard, not an excuse for raising the taxes on businesses like that one.

NuPTA also points to other cities with successfully "creative" funding mechanisms. One example is the City of Portland, Oregon whose world class transit system and exciting economy spurred by transit-oriented development was funded by trading in Federal Highway moneys.

Though long-term financial troubles loom over public transit in Rhode Island, this year there is some additional Federal help available. As a result, there is an exciting

opportunity to move beyond preventing a downward spiral. Indeed, the time is right to build a truly first class transit system in the state that can help serve our economic, environmental, and mobility needs. This is essential, especially since RIPTA annual ridership is up to about 24 million. Further, with high gas prices and concerns about shrinking open spaces, climate change and "global peak oil production," a critical mass of Americans is thinking about smart alternatives to driving.

To meet this need for a better transit system, the legislature has established a commission to study transit that has the potential to make positive recommendations. The Statewide Planning Council is also considering a bolder transit vision for their next Guide Plan update, soon to be underway. Our Congressional delegation has been supportive, and the Governor and RIDOT are serious about improving our commuter rail system. RIPTA management keeps the fleet in good condition, innovates on routes, and cooperates with diverse partners. The city of Providence has convened a Transit 2020 Working Group to envision transit opportunities in the metropolitan area. Elements of the business community are starting to see transit as an economic development opportunity, as it has been elsewhere.

All of this hard work bodes well for the future of transit in Rhode Island. We need to continue meeting Rhode Island's need for a healthy public transit system.

To this end, we have formed The New Public Transit Alliance (NuPTA), a coalition of public health advocates, environmentalists, community organizations, business groups and transit riders, that has come together to strengthen our public transit system. In order to address both immediate and long term public transit needs, state and regional planners need to:

1. Build the right leadership for public transit;
2. Encourage using mass transit over driving cars and trucks;
3. Make Rhode Island's bus/van system more efficient and accessible; and
4. Strengthen and expand the designated fixed route system.

New Public Transit Alliance

Investing in cleaner and smarter transportation methods will benefit our economy, the public health and welfare and the environment. Automobile dependency is a major factor in urban decay, sprawl, affordable housing crises, the asthma epidemic and global warming. Construction of new roads and highways lowers property values in surrounding communities and hurts economic development. The New Public Transit Alliance is dedicated to promoting and expanding affordable and convenient public transportation for all Rhode Islanders.

Chris Wilhite, Sierra Club

Barry Schiller, Sierra Club, Rhode Island Chapter

Almas Kalafian, National Federation of the Blind, Rhode Island Chapter

Molly Clark, American Lung Association of Rhode Island

James Celenza, Rhode Island Commission on Occupational Safety and Health

Art Handy, Rhode Island House of Representatives

Sheila Dormody, Clean Water Action

Denise Parrillo, Clean Water Action

Brad Hyson, Apeiron Institute for Environmental Living

Steve Farrell, Amalgamated Transit Union, Local 618

Everett Stuart, Rhode Island Association of Rail Passengers

Matt Auten, Rhode Island Public Interest Research Group

John Flaherty, Grow Smart Rhode Island

Greg Gerritt, Environment Council of Rhode Island

Tom Sgouros, Ocean State Action / Rhode Island Policy Reporter

Stephanie Cannady, ACORN

Rachel Sholly, Campus Climate Challenge – URI

Jessica Buhler, The Senior Agenda

1. Build the right leadership for public transit

- To help ensure proper legislative oversight of all modes of transportation, we recommend the General Assembly establish a standing Transportation Committee, perhaps by expanding the scope of the Joint Committee on Highway Safety.
- Revitalize RIPTA Board of Directors.
Implement the new statute regarding the Board of Directors of the RI Public Transit Authority that calls for a diverse board with “due consideration to recommendations for nominations from the National Federation of the Blind of Rhode Island, the Gray Panthers of Rhode Island, the Sierra Club of Rhode Island, the Rhode Island AFL-CIO, the RIPTA Transportation Advisory Committee, and the Rhode Island business community and the Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns.” (RI Gen. Laws, Ch. 39-18-2(b)) This should be done early in the next legislative session so RIPTA has a functioning Board fully capable of maintaining oversight and advocacy as soon as possible.
- Establish a statewide planning commission that has the authority to take on multi-city planning projects like improving public transit in the metro area and throughout the state. This commission may include business, public health, RIPTA, RIDOT, labor, state and city planning, elderly, disabled, affordable housing advocates, high school students, environmentalists, public members, riders, etc. A key role of the commission would be to increase coordination between RI DOT, RIPTA and the City of Providence. The first step would be to upgrade the statewide planning council to such a position.

2. Encourage mass transit over driving cars and trucks

- Encourage transit-oriented development. Require regional planners and developers to emphasize pedestrian mobility in all new developments. Require a public transit promotion plan as part of any publicly funded (through tax stabilization) developmental proposal. A success story in public transit development is the construction of Cranston Parkade in which access to public transit was emphasized and indeed central to the design.
- Encourage firms and municipalities that offer free parking for employees and visitors to offer public transit incentives based on EPA's "Best Workplaces for Commuters" program that is recommended in the State Guide Plan.
- Work with tourism, recreation, entertainment, and economic development interests to ensure extensive transit information is provided to tourists, including transit services to frequently visited sites, and sites that accommodate the disabled.
- Require CCRI, RIC, and URI-Providence to join the U-Pass program in which college IDs serve as bus passes.

- Encourage large institutions, especially those that are tax exempt, and large businesses along the trolley lines to "adopt" a trolley line as a community service by funding some operational costs, distributing and posting schedules, notifying employees, customers etc.
- Implement the State Guide Plan recommendation that state employees be offered incentives for transit use.
- Have seamless fare products that can be used intermodally on RIPTA, MBTA commuter rail, the ferry, etc.

3. Make Rhode Island's bus/van system more efficient and accessible

- RIPTA needs more buses on certain routes. There has been an increase in bus ridership of more than 10% every year. Because this increase in ridership has not been addressed with more buses, at least eight RIPTA bus lines are experiencing overcrowding in which riders are forced to stand during the trip. Indeed, the buses are so overcrowded that many would be riders are passed by because there is not enough room on the bus. In order to continue to increase ridership and improve RIPTA's image, it is of utmost importance that RIPTA meet the current demand by putting more of its buses on the road.
- Fix Kennedy Plaza
The current design is too small for the size of the bus/van system and has led to inconvenience and safety issues. We need to study how to make additional space available for passengers and transit vehicles and/or change bus patterns with alternate hubs. We also need to improve shelters and building access, and make information more readily available, perhaps by restoring an outdoor schedule board. Through public forums, we should involve high school students, riders, local residents and businesses in formal planning sessions where they would be given an opportunity to come up with ways to improve safety, and the perception of safety, in Kennedy Plaza.
- Create greater efficiency for RIPTA by periodically examining the eligibility of current Paratransit/RIde participants to maximize use of the fixed-route system wherever practical. More riders could switch to riding fixed route buses if physical and safety conditions in Kennedy Plaza were improved. It is essential that the Department of Elderly Affairs, Human Services, and the RIPTA ADA program managers be involved in planning and implementing such a paratransit program. Carrying out such a program will use resources more efficiently and make the entire RIPTA operation more cost-effective.
- Improve pedestrian conditions around bus stops, including bus shelters, sidewalk repairs, traffic calming to slow traffic, enforcement of parking regulations, snow removal from sidewalks, etc. Ensure diesel buses do not idle unnecessarily, which impairs pedestrian air quality and health.

- Reduce small particles and other pollutants from buses and fleet vehicles with emission reduction devices and fuel modifications to prevent harmful contributions to asthma, heart disease, lung cancer. Retrofit devices such as diesel particulate filters (DPFs) can cut small particle emissions by 90 percent and fuel modifications can also be effective. It is important for RIPTA to continue its good work applying DPF retrofit, using ultra-low sulfur fuel, and exploring alternative fuels and technology where technologically feasible to secure health benefits for riders, drivers, and the general public.
- Implement the state guide plan to help speed bus and van trips. One way to do this is by signal transponders to extend green lights for buses at key intersections.
- Restore 50-cent "short-zone" downtown for short shuttle type trips.
- Establish transit kiosks at key transfer points that provide transit information - routes, schedules, fares, destinations, etc.
- RIPTA should print a schedule booklet as a promotional item as well as a convenient trip planner. Schedule books should contain all inbound and outbound schedules for each route as well as a system map.

4. Strengthen and expand the designated fixed route system

- As an opportunity to build an exciting and truly first class transit system in the state, continue to carefully study the financing, economic and environmental potential of fixed route options like electric streetcar and bus rapid transit (BRT) services along suitable corridors (such as Allens Avenue, Valley St, East Providence waterfront)
- Alternative transit modes like streetcars, BRT, and the approved commuter rail, must develop a seamless network with, rather than at the expense of, our existing bus/van system. Fixed route services and their schedules, marketing, and fare systems should be integrated with land use planning efforts and our bus and van system, and seek to serve the Providence market as well as Boston.
- Expand our commuter rail services as planned to TF Green, Wickford Junction, and if deemed feasible, Pawtucket, while studying additional stops in Woonsocket, Cranston, East Greenwich, Kingston, Westerly, and Quonset Point.
- Improve public transit accessibility for long-distance commutes. Provide adequate parking for commuter rail stations and at key junctures along bus lines so that commuters can easily access the public transit system for long distance commutes.