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CONTACT

Nick Sifuentes, nsifuentes@tstc.org

Liam Blank, liam@tstc.org

Survey of Over One Thousand Riders in Four States Reveals What Riders Need to Feel Safe on Public Transit

Advocacy Group Sends Open Letter to Senators in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Connecticut: “Your Constituents Want Safe Service; You Must Fund Public Transit”

Survey Shows Riders Want Transit Agencies to Increase Service Frequency and Cleaning to Regain Rider Confidence Post Pandemic

New York, NY - Today, Tri-State Transportation Campaign (TSTC) released the [results of a survey](#) asking over one thousand commuters who use public transit what interventions they want to see to feel safe riding transit as states reopen. At the same time, TSTC released [open letters to Senators in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut](#) calling on them to provide federal support for beleaguered transit agencies whose operations budgets are strained by shortfalls as they work to meet riders’ safety needs.

The coronavirus pandemic has caused ridership on public transit to plummet to historic lows, with the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), New Jersey Transit, Port Authority Trans-Hudson (PATH), Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) regional rail, and Port Authority Transit Corporation (PATCO) Speedline seeing ridership declines at or above 90% at the height of the pandemic. Passenger declines have led to severe funding crises for transit systems regionally and nationwide, with few suffering more than in the Philadelphia-New York corridor, where the impact of the pandemic has been greatest. Despite this, public transit agencies have continued to run service to meet essential workers’ needs and have increased station and equipment cleaning efforts—all measures that increase operating costs.

To ensure public transit can continue serving riders and prevent agencies from having to cancel service, raise fares, or collapse entirely, [Tri-State Transportation Campaign’s open letters](#) call on the eight Senators representing the four states to ensure federal funds in the HEROES Act and subsequent legislation can meet the operations needs of transit agencies until ridership returns. “Public transit is a necessary service that deserves federal support, especially for the essential workers who have relied on our region’s buses and trains to get them to and from hospitals, warehouses, grocery stores, and other places of work, allowing the rest of the workforce to shelter in place safely,” the letter contends. “We owe it to our essential workforce,

many of whom lack employer-provided healthcare or sick leave and yet still risked their lives to provide needed services, to keep the transit they rely on functional and affordable.”

[The open-ended survey](#) of riders on MTA, NJ Transit, PATH, SEPTA, and PATCO services asked both those who regularly rode transit but had stopped doing so during the pandemic and riders who continued to ride transit even during the shutdown (i.e., essential workers) to write in what they would need to feel safe on transit. The survey found that while eight percent of riders reported they would not likely use transit until a vaccine was found—or at all—fully ninety-two percent of riders reported they would return to transit with proper safety measures in place. According to the survey, riders’ most requested interventions included increased cleaning, mask requirements, and reduced maximum passenger capacity on trains and buses. However, amongst survey respondents who are currently riding transit (meaning essential workers), their highest priority was greater service frequency—a point TSTC was quick to note in their open letter.

Riders’ recommendations largely dovetailed with guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and local governments, and concurred with a forthcoming report from TSTC recommending a suite of fifty public health and safety interventions for agencies, elected officials, businesses and riders themselves. “Riders’ asks were sensible, actionable, and in line with the science as we know it,” said **Nick Sifuentes, Executive Director of Tri-State Transportation Campaign**. “While it’s clear that crowded housing, employers’ failure to provide paid sick leave, and workplaces with poor safeguards have been the primary drivers of infection, and not transit, many riders will need to feel that their buses and trains are safe again before they come back. And for those essential workers who have been riding transit this whole time, the least we owe them is safer transit. These recommendations are a roadmap for how to get there.”

Fortunately, some transit agencies are already taking proper safety precautions: increasing service levels, requiring face coverings for all transit users, upgrading cleaning procedures, and calling for flexible workplace arrangements as states begin to reopen. The MTA, for instance, released a thirteen-point plan for phase one of New York City’s reopening and has seen high mask compliance among riders. It remains the case, however, that transit agencies’ operational budgets will require further assistance from their state and federal governments.

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Tri-State Transportation Campaign is a 27-year old advocacy organization that fights for an equitable, safe, multi-modal transportation network that provides options and supports the economies of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. TSTC works to fix our commutes, meet our climate goals, stop traffic deaths, and make transportation fair.