



## SEPTA's Savior is Safety

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Complaining about a big city's mass transit system is as obligatory as students complaining about the food served at their high schools and colleges, even when "the systems" work for improvement.

Our SEPTA system is in dire straits and many of us will suffer when the impending cuts in service and elimination of some PT routes take place this fall. The ostensible saviors to the recurring financial woes are increased fares and increased money from the state. However, the elephant in the room that is alluded to but never addressed by civic and private leaders is more people in the Philadelphia region would use the SEPTA system if it were safe.

In fairness to the SEPTA organization, it is not a lack of trying to improve service and to improve the rider's experience. Since the dip in ridership reached a critical point in 2018, SEPTA has offered a litany of improvements from buying new rail cars and trolleys to heated bus shelters.

Well over half of the trips in PT in the region are taken via bus. SEPTA has been attentive to these riders with a "Bus Revolution." We have seen major efforts to upgrade buses such as new and improved models, and bike, wheelchair, and stroller-friendly additions.

Efforts were made to move the buses along by establishing bus only lanes, ticketing those who plug up the works, and even using AI to help violators to abide by a sense of civic responsibility. Some have challenged city council members to travel by bus to demonstrate how "the other half lives," so they will be motivated to fix what assaults the senses of the PT rider daily.

Added to the newfangled buses and rail cars are investments in a new fleet of trolleys for eight routes in several parts of the city and Delaware County.

A major improvement for all who ride, whether by regional train, light rail, trolley, or bus is the Key card program. With any new technology there were some glitches, but on balance it was a welcome addition in several ways. A few large organizations had pilot programs to give a free card, and another pilot gave low-income residents free trips.

Parking in PT lots has been challenging and SEPTA responded with more spaces, easy to use pay systems, bike racks, and even a pilot program with Uber and Lift to get commuters to the stations. Upgrades to stations were made, especially a major cleansing and face lift at the 69th Street terminal feeding buses and the Market-Frankford east to west Line subway. There has been some effort to curtail the smoking at stations and on the platforms and a “war on grime,” especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

New arrivals to the city found a fresh Wayfinding signage and information campaign program to make the modes and routes easy to understand and navigate and be accessible and welcoming.

But what about crime and threats to one’s senses and body? Apologists will say and write that we need to “overcome our fear” of feeling unsafe, as if this is imagined. Even if one can acquiesce to such a dubious claim, we hear the whispers and overt statements from many that they won’t subject themselves to public transportation, especially lines running through Philadelphia and major stops downtown.

Such an environment hurts what Philadelphia treasures most and touts to the world: remarkable historical, cultural, arts and leisure, educational, health-related, and sporting places and events. Moreover, it takes thick skin to “work downtown” and travel by PT. It is surprising that the leaders from each of these sectors have not coalesced to demand from public officials a safe PT system.

Imagine all presidents of colleges and universities in the city, or all directors of the nonprofit arts and culture groups, or all heads of the many museums, or major business leaders marching into a mayor’s office and demanding a serious plan to change?

SEPTA, public officials, and mass transit advocates expect money to flow from the state and if there is hesitation or they come up light, the legislators are castigated as heartless. City residents did not help their cause by voting-in the likely third term district attorney who has no enthusiasm for curtailing crime in the city. The message: Philadelphia residents won't help themselves.

Running SEPTA and funding the services will continue to be a wicked problem. Wicked problems are those that are complex, involve many stakeholders with competing benefits-loss, have interconnected variables hard to unbundle, and when moves are made to mitigate the issue, resistance or backlash occurs from either intended or unintended consequences.

But the adage holds here that the first step in a problem is admitting that there is a problem. One leader in the public eye, President John Fry of Temple, stated the safety problem on day one of his new job: "Public safety is the cornerstone of any institution. If people don't feel safe, if they don't feel like they are in a good public environment, it really sort of distracts them from the work they are supposed to be doing..."

More people would ride SEPTA and pay if they had "safe travels." This should be on the list of saviors.