

Commuters have bemoaned Philly's public transit for decades – in 1967, a librarian got the city to listen

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A SEPTA train moves along the Market-Frankford Line in West Philadelphia.

AP Photo/Matt Rourke

On April 13, 1967, around 1:30 p.m., Lt. Joseph Larkin of the Philadelphia Police Department's subway unit visited the Philadelphia High School for Girls to interview the school's librarian, 61-year-old Miriam S. Axelrod.

Axelrod had written a letter to Mayor James H.J. Tate about poor conditions on Philadelphia's Broad Street Line subway. In her letter, she stated that the escalators in the subway concourse of the Walnut-Locust station were out of operation for several weeks and requested that they "be put in running order."

Axelrod also asked that “something be done” about people using the subway stairs “as a latrine.”

As a historian of post-1968 Philadelphia, a proud alumna of Girls’ High and a rider of Philadelphia’s mass transit, Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority – more commonly known as SEPTA – I was thrilled to find Axelrod’s story among 1960s administrative reports to the police commissioner in the city archives.

Axelrod’s story reminds us that for nearly a century, Philadelphia’s mass transit has been plagued by poor conditions and unstable funding. Commuters’ complaints have often convinced government officials to act. However, no effective plan has ever been implemented to definitively solve the city’s transit crises.

SEPTA’s current turmoil

On Sept. 15, 2025, SEPTA fully restored its service, by court order, after implementing 20% service reductions and a 21.5% fare increase due to a US\$213 million budget deficit.

Service cuts began on Aug. 24, just one day before public school students returned to classrooms. This left kids, seniors and people from nonwhite, working-class communities with few alternative routes. Riders faced lengthy travel times or were even stranded on their daily commute.



Passengers at Olney Transportation Center in North Philadelphia board a SEPTA bus on Aug. 25, 2025, a day after major service cuts went into effect.

AP Photo/Matt Rourke

Over 600,000 people travel on SEPTA's 172 routes each day. For weeks, state legislators could not agree on how to fund SEPTA within the state budget. City officials, transit executives and tourism experts advocated for a bailout because Pennsylvania will reap tax revenue when Philly hosts millions of tourists in 2026 for America's 250th birthday, the FIFA World Cup and the Major League Baseball All-Star Game.

Ultimately, Gov. Josh Shapiro authorized the use of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation's capital funds to finance SEPTA's operations through June 2027.

Some lawmakers have argued that SEPTA is guilty of mismanaging funds, since the agency already received over \$1 billion in state subsidies last year for operating assistance and asset improvement.

Public transport in the 1920s

As a longtime Philadelphian who lived in Center City, Miriam Axelrod was familiar with the strengths and shortcomings of public transportation.

At the age of 4, her family emigrated from Russia to Carmel, New Jersey. By 1920, they made Philadelphia their home just as the city's Russian community became the largest immigrant group due to Jewish people escaping pogroms in Europe. Axelrod grew up living in South and North Philadelphia.

At that time, dozens of private transit companies operated in Philly.

Southern Penn operated city buses. Red Arrow provided suburban trolley service. Pennsylvania and Reading railroads offered high-speed rail lines. The Philadelphia Rapid Transit Co. alone brokered deals with 64 underlying companies to annually rent their services under 999-year leases. Fiscal responsibility for quality transportation was complicated and often dependent on public funding.

During PRT's early years, it paid the city \$15,000 annually for snow removal. In return, the city spent \$2 million for street paving and bridge repairs.

By 1922, the PRT and the city had built and unified two elevated train routes – with assistance from the Union Traction Co. and the Market Street Elevated Passenger Railway Co. – to create the Market-Frankford Elevated Train Line.



ELLEN MARGARET ALEXY *Commercial*
801 Callowhill Street

Chief Judge; B Judge; Senator; Representative;
Monitor; Advertising Committee; Social Workers; Stu-
dents' Aid; Athletic Club; Civic Club; Social Dancing
Club; Sigma Gamma Delta.

*Ellen, even when severe,
Was so very, very dear,
That even a culprit could not fear
Her tender, kindly eyes.*

She had a first-class motto: "When joy and duty clash,
then joy must go to smash." This motto helped greatly
when our Chief Judge played the part of probation
officer on our dance floors.

FLORENCE ALTHAUS *Commercial*
5927 North 13th Street
Monitor; Volunteer; Choral.

*She has a manner gentle,
And a voice that is refined;
A nature that is good and true,
And a heart that is really kind.*

Florence was one of that memorable group who
stayed at Stevens Annex for the G term. The rest of
the class seems to have missed something, for Florence
still engages in hours of conversation on the good times
they had there. She thoroughly enjoyed her Freshie
stage.



SONIA MIRIAM AXELROD *Academic-Commercial*
2239 North 27th Street

Monitor; Athletic Club; Civic Club.

*Though she agreed with some things she heard,
She always did have the very last word.*

Miriam has a remarkable capacity for starting argu-
ments. Any debatable subject will do. She seems to
have enough points to defend anything. We all remem-
ber the times we came to class unprepared, and Miriam
started a discussion that lasted till the bell rang, and
when the class was over "we rose with one accord and
called her blessed."

Classmates at William Penn remembered Miriam Axelrod's 'remarkable capacity for starting arguments.'

Ancestry.com, U.S. School Yearbooks, 1900-2016

That was the same year Axelrod graduated from William Penn High School for Girls. Her classmates keenly noted in their yearbook that she had a "remarkable capacity for starting arguments" in which "any debatable subject will do."

Six years later, the first segment of the Broad Street Subway traveling from Olney Station in North Philadelphia to City Hall opened to the public. Unlike the bus, trolley and railways systems, the city owned the El, short for elevated, line and subway. The city leased both systems to PRT and made the transit company responsible for their maintenance.



Buses and trolley cars drive down Market Street in Philadelphia in the 1930s.

Charles Phelps Cushing/ClassicStock via Getty Images

The Depression years

Philadelphia first witnessed underfunded mass transit during the Great Depression.

In 1934, PRT faced a budget deficit when it was unable to pay the \$7.1 million annual rentals to the underliers. PRT later went to court to request a consolidation plan. To make matters worse, PRT had spent approximately \$230 million from 1902 through 1939, but that didn't include spending to modernize old transit equipment.

On Jan. 1, 1940, the Philadelphia Transportation Co., a private company with a 21-member board of directors that included five city representatives including the mayor, Robert E. Lamberton, merged the transit companies and took over PRT's operations. PTC became responsible for 10,000 employees and providing transportation for 2 million passengers a day.

PTC also acquired extensive financial responsibilities. Payroll expenses cost \$327,000 each week. The annual rate for leasing the subway and El was roughly \$3 million. PTC had to provide its 25,000 bondholders an annual income of at least \$959,207 while also fulfilling its promise to offer modern transit vehicles.

Overcrowding and frequent fare increases

During the 1940s through the 1960s, Axelrod took public transportation to her job as a librarian at Central High School and later Frankford High School.

Meanwhile, PTC made good on its promise to provide better transit service. In its first eight years of operation, PTC spent \$22.8 million to purchase 1,506 new streetcars, buses and trackless trolleys while also improving terminal and plant facilities. The company even purchased advertisements in The Philadelphia Inquirer to highlight its achievements. PTC extended 38 existing routes and created 18 new routes that serviced old residential and industrial areas, along with newly developed neighborhoods.

By 1949, however, many of PTC's 3.2 million daily riders were complaining about overcrowded subways, the end of free exchanges between popular routes and frequent fare increases.



Passengers ride a subway car in Philadelphia on Feb. 15, 1946.

AP Photo

Both PTC and the city faced scrutiny for these issues, although each party had distinct transit obligations outlined in their joint contract. PTC had to provide “safe and adequate service” that included spending on maintenance and replacement of transit equipment. The city was responsible for police and fire services on mass transit along with auditing PTC’s records. Both parties had to agree on fare changes under the state Public Utility Commission’s supervision.

Nevertheless, when issues on mass transit occurred, the city could persuade PTC to improve conditions, but the city was only required to offer emergency services to commuters.

When Larkin personally addressed Axelrod’s 1967 complaint about the subway, he informed her that the United Elevator Co. was repairing the escalators. He also assured her that the subway unit arrested 45 to 50 intoxicated people each month because they were at risk of falling onto the subway tracks. In “isolated cases,” Larkin explained, police arrested people for public urination and defecation.

Larkin reassured Axelrod that PTC could keep subway conditions clean and under control. In reality, PTC was underwater in responsibilities and debt.

On Sept. 30, 1968, SEPTA, a state agency formed five years earlier, took over PTC and managed transportation for the city and its surrounding areas. SEPTA bought PTC for approximately \$47.9 million, settling the company's debt, accepting its pension liability and buying out the institution's roughly 1.7 million shareholders. Now federal and state funding rather than fare revenue largely determined the quality of the city's public transit.

Decades of unpredictable funding

Since the 1960s, annual government funding to SEPTA has been unpredictable. White flight, deindustrialization and job flight have contributed to depopulation, a declining tax base and government defunding of social programs in Philadelphia. These socioeconomic shifts continue to affect Philadelphia's budget for education, public housing and recreation as well as SEPTA's \$2.743 billion budget as a public transit agency.

Five counties in Greater Philadelphia contribute subsidies to SEPTA in exchange for transit service. Philadelphia alone contributes \$110 million. State subsidies also help finance SEPTA's \$1.74 billion operating budget, while federal subsidies support SEPTA's \$1 billion capital budget to pay for major repairs and new equipment. State politicians annually vote on funding for SEPTA, but there has not been a concrete solution to the funding crisis.

For years, politicians have proposed using county sales and gas taxes along with business licensing fees to fund mass transit, without success. Additionally, since 2008 rising rates of car ownership have also led to fewer commuters and reduced fare revenues for SEPTA.

However, Philadelphians never ceased to demand better transit service. During the 1980s, the Pennsylvania Public Interest Coalition established the Transit Riders Action Campaign, also known as TRAC, which advocated that SEPTA have better safety, funding, accountability, service and stable fares. The Transport Workers Union Local 234 advised TRAC, while several organizations partnered with them: the Action Alliance of Senior Citizens, the Clean Air Council, Disabled in Action and the Delaware Valley Interfaith Coalition.

Even today, local groups such as Save the Train with outspoken commuters – like Axelrod was in her day – have launched campaigns to halt service cutbacks and encourage residents to write and telephone legislators who can vote to fund SEPTA. Residents have consistently united to advocate for quality mass transit. All that remains is an agreement among lawmakers to make it possible.

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