Transportation

The State of Public Transit in Philadelphia: How it Got Here and Where it is Going

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Public transportation in the United States is a dying industry, and in need of serious help. The situation is dire for what once was the pinnacle of industrialization, a mainstay in in the lives of every American, and an embodiment of what it means to be “for the people”. With the rising cost of owning an automobile seemingly growing exponentially year-over-year, being made up of a nasty concoction of the roaring costs of fuel, insurance and loan rates along with the omnipresent issue of climate change (the month before this was written, July of 2023, was the hottest month in recorded history), a mountain of people in the US are considering going carless altogether. However, in order to go carless, it would mean that cities and towns in the US would have to update their old, dirty, and dilapidated transportation systems that have been lying nearly dormant since World War II. How did we get here? The United States was once the Mecca of public transit with unbelievable networks of streetcars, trolleys, regional rails and more. More specifically, where I live in Philadelphia was once caked in affordable trolley networks whose maps mirrored that of the streets in which they were laid, and now that network only exists in West Philadelphia, and the massive inner-city subways such as the Market-Frankford Line (MFL or “El”) and the Broad Street Line (BSL) lie rotting. In order to examine how we got here, we need to learn a bit about the history of the network.

The genesis of Philadelphia’s public transportation network started with a ferry that ran from the city across the Delaware to Fort Nassau, which is now the city of Camden. It was vital to the growth of both cities because it brought Philadelphians to New Jersey which laid the groundwork for Camden’s once mighty manufacturing industry to grow and allowed people coming from New York or other areas of New Jersey to Philadelphia much quicker than before. From there, with the explosion of rail in the United states in the mid-to-late 19th century, the Pennsylvania Railroad, Reading Railroad and others started to grow their commuter rails in and around the city which made it much easier for people and good to travel to and from the city and contributed to a massive growth in population and industry. Shortly thereafter was the advent of horse-drawn streetcars which revolutionized inner-city travel by allowing people to get around the city itself much quicker than walking, and by then it was a quick ascension to the trolley networks that would go on to dominate the early 20th century. By 1908 the city opened the Market Street Subway-Elevated (now the MFL), which was the first high speed subway line that zipped passengers around the city faster than ever before, and not long after opened the Broad Street Subway (now the BSL). After the invention of the internal combustion engines came busses that ran through the city in the early 1910s, and all of the busses, trolleys, subways and commuter rails were running at peak performance until the Great Depression hit in 1929.

By this point there was a major ownership change going on with public transit. In the beginning, almost the entire industry was run by private, for-profit companies that had either one or two lines. By the early 20th century a monopoly on streetcars formed called Philadelphia Rapid Transit (PRT), and the commuter rails consolidated into the highly influential and competitive Pennsylvania and Reading Railroad companies. However by the time the depression hit, in an effort to cut costs and save their monopolies, these companies started to slash service, marking the first major decline of public transportation services in the city. It was not long before the cost of the automobile fell through the floor, and the signing Interstate Highway Act began to encourage Americans to buy cars and move to the white picket-fenced suburbs around the city. By 1960, Philadelphia began to subsize public transit services, and by 1965 the South Eastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) was founded. Now forgotten by Americans with their new toys, the once mighty network of trolleys, busses, and rails began to slowly rot until we have reached today.

Now, SEPTA owns and operates nearly all public transit in and around the city (minus PATCO which is run by the Delaware River Port Authority and Amtrak). SEPTA is known for its complete mismanagement of the system in which it inherited, complete with numerous strikes, criminal underfunding and largest of all its visibly deteriorating network which continues to frustrate Philadelphians. A lot of the grief that Philadelphians have with SEPTA stems from the fact that its controlling board of directors is made up of equal representation of all of the counties it represents: Philadelphia, Bucks, Delaware, Montgomery and Chester. This is in spite of the fact that Philadelphia’s population of 1,567,258 (July 1, 2022 estimate) makes up nearly 40% of all possible riders, not counting for the fact that urban areas are likely to have higher ridership than suburban or rural areas. This has lead to numerous issues with internal politics within SEPTA’s board where the 8 members of the rural/suburban counties outnumber the 2 members of the 6th largest city in the United States, causing funding issues and leaving inner-city transportation services completely overlooked. That in combination that SEPTA itself only gets a piece of the Turnpike’s funding pie, with it only getting $180 million of the total $450 million budget. SEPTA has also not been allowed by Harrisburg to tax residents of Philadelphia to raise money, leaving them with no other option for funding and completely at the discretion of state and local funding.

All told, not only have Philadelphians had to watch its once world-class public transportation system be degraded over time to a measly fraction of what it once was, but they have to fight against the combined representation their neighboring counties of Bucks, Delaware, Montgomery and Chester just to get a piece of the pie that the Pennsylvania Turnpike gets from Harrisburg even though it is the 6th most populous city and the 10th highest in Gross Metropolitan Product in the country.

Philadelphians are outraged about the severe neglect their public transit network faces amid the rising cost of automobiles and impact of climate change. Complaints about the cleanliness in the trains and stations, the abhorrent smell of urine and feces as well as a plethora of high-press shootings surrounding them have caused people to try to stay away from SEPTA altogether. SEPTA even had to shut down the Somerset station in 2021 because “the mechanics have been damaged by urination, by discarded needles being jammed into the floorboards”, says SEPTA’s General Manager Leslie Richards. A lot of these problems of drug use and shootings on trains and stations have to do with several larger problems such as the ongoing opioid epidemic in the American Northeast as well as a history of systemic racism and police brutality throughout the 20th century in Philadelphia, however SEPTA should have the means to mitigate this on their properties in order to make the system cleaner and safer to attract new riders and keep frequenters.

To combat this harsh current reality, the city of Philadelphia in combination with SEPTA released a Philadelphia Transit plan in February of 2021 that extends all the way out until 2045. The highlights of the plan include adding more bus lanes to make buses more efficient on city streets, improving safety and cleanliness at all transit stops/stations, modernizing and expanding the aging trolley network, restructuring fares to make the system more equitable, adding new stops every few years to the MFL and BSL, and reimagining the way regional rail works by having 2-car trains run every 15 minutes instead of a 6-car train running every 60 minutes. While the plan sounds exciting, ambitious and exactly what residents of the city have been waiting for, it still does not have a clear plan to fund all of these expansive efforts.

Yet, while SEPTA remains stuck on how to fund its ambitious plans, the ticking time bomb of climate change looms over Americans, with its partner in crime of rising costs of owning a car sticking right alongside it. A massive solution to those problems would be for America to revert its transportation to its pre-war days by restoring the might of the American public transportation network. By moving more people in bulk on these networks, America can cut down on its CO2 emissions exponentially all the while Americans would no longer be bogged down by the cost of buying a car and the cost of the fuel, insurance, maintenance and parking that comes along with it. It would also force many Americans to move back into more urban cities and towns, which would then strengthen communities by bringing people closer together than how they are now spread out in suburbs. Not to mention the fact that not owning a car would also encourage Americans to get out walking from place to place more often, which would lead to people feeling healthier and more fit. All of this requires Americans to do something that they have rarely done in the entire 247 year history of the nation: change their behavior. It is not often when Americans change their behavior to fix a problem, rather it is more commonplace for people to simply look like they are. Instead of going carless, people jump on electric cars because it looks like they are solving the problem (they are not). SEPTA can play a key role in war against climate change going forward if they can manage to overcome the challenges that they have faced since their inception in 1965, and the city of Philadelphia has the chance to once again be the guiding hand that Americans can look up to for the future. Hopefully in the future they realize this and revitalize the glory days of the titan of transit that once was the great city of Philadelphia.