

March 18, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, The Capitol
Washington DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United State Senate
S-230, The Capitol
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
S-221, The Capitol
Washington DC 20510

Cc:

Chairman Mike Crapo, Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs
Ranking Member Sherrrod Brown, Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs
Chairman Richard Shelby, Senate Committee on Appropriations
Ranking Member Pat Leahy, Senate Committee on Appropriations
Chairman Peter DeFazio, House Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure
Ranking Member Sam Graves, House Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure
Chairwoman Nita Lowey, House Committee on Appropriations
Ranking Member Kay Granger, House Committee on Appropriations
Members of the Senate
Members of the House

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader McCarthy, and
Minority Leader Schumer:

Due to the economic slowdown brought on by the spread of the novel coronavirus, many sectors of our economy are in need of financial support. Social distancing and reduced demand for certain public services are having, and will continue to have, a negative impact on many agency operating budgets, including public transit.

We strongly urge Congress to provide public transit agencies with at least \$12.875 billion in immediate direct financial assistance to ensure the continuation of safe and reliable service, including when the public health crisis has subsided but agency budgets are still experiencing strain.

Public transit agencies provide essential mobility to millions of Americans. For many people, transit service is the only way to access a doctor, pharmacy, job (including health care jobs), or childcare. This is especially true for many low-income people, communities of color, and people with significant cognitive and physical disabilities that rely on door-to-door paratransit service provided by local transit authorities. It is also true for

people who cannot afford to own a car, and seniors, youth, and others who cannot operate a vehicle.

Public transit agencies are experiencing significant decreases in ridership and farebox revenue, while simultaneously incurring increased costs for additional cleaning. Without federal financial assistance, many transit agencies and paratransit service providers will be forced to dramatically reduce or eliminate critical service. This could cut off health care and other workers from jobs, and further harm economic output.

Existing formula programs are designed to support capital investments. Simply stated, they are not designed to address the unique circumstances public transit agencies, riders, and local communities are facing during this public health crisis. In addition, many public transit agencies are precluded from receiving federal and state formula funds but will still be significantly impacted.

We strongly urge Congress to put additional funds in the hands of transit agencies that need it most for immediate operational and cleaning assistance and to ensure that these systems can continue to provide their essential service. One way to achieve this would be for Congress to temporarily waive the prohibition on using capital funds for operational expenses in mid- to large- communities (49 USC 5307). While we appreciate the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) guidance providing additional flexibility to use formula funds for operating expenses, and at an increased federal share,¹ this action alone is not a sustainable solution. Additional funding and policies will be necessary to ensure the resources are provided to transit agencies that need it the most, including those who do not receive federal and state formula funds.

Without additional funding for direct operating assistance during this crisis, public transit agencies will be forced to use their limited capital funding to maintain operations during this crisis, undermining the long term fiscal health of the agency, and worsening the already significant multi-billion dollar maintenance backlog.

Local communities and transit agencies are being impacted in different ways, with some losing ridership to a much greater extent than others. This should be taken into account when supplemental funds are given to transit agencies.

Congress should also act to protect public transit agencies from future cuts to funding resulting from temporary ridership loss caused by people following the advice of public health experts. Formula funds are based in part on ridership from the previous year. Without Congressional action, public transit agencies may face additional financial pressure next year after the crisis is over due to reduced ridership during the crisis. Congress can consider a hold-harmless provision to ensure public transit agencies are able to sustain their vital capital investment programs.

¹ <https://www.transit.dot.gov/about/news/us-department-transportation-announces-increased-flexibility-help-transit-agencies>

There is recent precedent to demonstrate the likely impact on public transit, riders, and local communities, and therefore the need for these types of investments. During the Great Recession of 2008-2009, transit agencies were forced to make enormous cuts to service and lay off thousands of employees, which had devastating impacts on riders and communities. Millions of people were left stranded in the wake of these massive cuts. As just one example, the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) [eliminated more than half of their bus service](#) and train headways grew to 30 minutes at certain times of day. Failure to provide targeted operating assistance will likely result in similar service cuts today, and it could be years before service is restored.

We urge Congress to take proper action to ensure millions of Americans have access to health care and essential services during and after this public health crisis.

Sincerely,

Beth Osborne, Director
Transportation for America

Michelle Robinson
Director of Clean Transportation Program
Union of Concerned Scientists

And

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