

Extend Fare-Free Transit and Support Our Transit Drivers

To Governor Lamont and the members of the Connecticut General Assembly,

The undersigned organizations urge you to extend fare-free bus transit with additional support for the dedicated and hardworking transit bus drivers who make our bus transit system possible. The state has a surplus, a multi-billion dollar rainy day fund, and incoming federal investments for transportation to use for this purpose.

Fare-free bus transit has been popular with riders as it provides much needed financial relief, increases trips taken by transit compared with cars, and represents an equitable approach to reducing transportation costs. It reaches residents most in need. Riders who are lower-income, black or Hispanic, immigrants, or under 50 are especially likely to use public transportation on a regular basis. The 2021 American Community Survey shows that Black folks in Connecticut are about 6 times more likely to commute by public transportation than white folks, Hispanic/Latino folks are about 2.5x more likely. Riders have more money to afford food, rent, utility bills, and other basic necessities because of fare-free bus transit.

Fare-free transit has increased ridership in Connecticut, with ridership exceeding pre-COVID levels in August. Connecticut's Global Warming Solutions Act requires greenhouse gas emissions to be reduced 45% by 2030 and 80% by 2050. More riders opting to use public transportation over personal vehicles will help achieve this goal, and fare-free bus transit removes barriers for new/infrequent riders, especially parents traveling with kids. Fare-free makes bus transit an attractive, affordable option.

Bus travel is also much safer than driving a car.¹ Moreover, bus operators are typically managing fare payments concurrent with safe vehicle operation. Removing fare collection management from the bus driver duties helps drivers focus on safe operation.

In tandem with extending fare-free transit, more support is needed for bus drivers. COVID-19 has had profound impacts on operators with bus transit drivers experiencing elevated exposure to COVID-19 and elevated death rates.² Bus drivers themselves are essential workers, who transport other essential workers. While this was widely recognized, bus transit drivers had to fight for PPE, protections, and hazard pay too long into the pandemic. They are underappreciated and underpaid, with the increased cost of living, what was once an adequate wage is barely enough to pay for basic essentials. We urge you to increase funding for driver compensation.

¹Public Transit Is Key Strategy in Advancing Vision Zero, Eliminating Traffic Fatalities, August 2018, <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/Resources/resources/hottopics/Documents/APTA%2520VZN%2520Transit%2520Safety%2520Brief%25208.2018.pdf&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1667917684347064&usg=AOvVaw1pob3QqNC6i5YMekZrvqpt>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7133a4.htm>

Poverty, mental health, addiction and other issues Connecticut residents are experiencing are present on the bus transit system. People are spending time on the bus sometimes because they don't have somewhere else to go or other services to access. Low-income residents especially are facing rising rents and increasing evictions. Bus drivers need to focus their attention on driving, and also require additional support beyond compensation to address the societal issues occurring on the bus. Measures that should be explored include: pairing social workers with bus routes, adding supervisors designated for safety issues, and installing, improving, or repairing safety equipment.

In conclusion, we ask for your support to allocate funding to extend fare-free transit and to increase funding for driver compensation and safety measures.

Sincerely,

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