



Statement on Proposed FY 2018 SEPTA Capital Budget

April 2017

The Delaware Valley Association of Rail Passengers supports the proposed Fiscal 2018 SEPTA Capital Budget, though with reservations about specific projects, most notably SEPTA Key.

The proposed Capital Budget represents a reasonable balance between state of good repair and service improvement projects attainable with available capital resources. Passage of Act 98 in 2013 has significantly increased capital investment in SEPTA, and SEPTA has used that additional funding to expedite important projects that maintain the safety and integrity of the region's transit infrastructure and projects that will help to increase ridership. We agree with SEPTA's overall capital strategy.

Thanks to that increased funding we are now at the point where most of the projects needed to ameliorate conditions that threatened service, or to comply with unfunded mandates have been completed, and an increased share of the capital budget can go to service enhancements and system expansion. This is good news for SEPTA riders and the citizens of the Delaware Valley.

New Payment Technology

Our chief concern for the past five years has been SEPTA's New Payment Technology program, now known as SEPTA Key. The project is years late and millions over budget; and as we explained in our Operating Budget testimony, key elements that were supposed to be breakthroughs in making the system more customer-friendly have been dropped from the program.

Our members who are using SEPTA Key in place of a TransPass or tokens report that the system is working well for their needs, but that's the easy part of the job. SEPTA has not yet tackled the more complicated tasks of accepting open payments, supporting interdivisional and interagency travel, and applying SEPTA Key to the Regional Rail Division.

What we have seen in those latter areas is worrisome. DVARP members have reported frequent problems trying to use their SEPTA Key for weekend rail travel. SEPTA's proposed tariff for interagency cooperation with PATCO greatly reduces the PATCO Freedom Card interoperability promised to stakeholders at the time the project was first approved. And since the pilot program for PM peak fare collection in the Center City stations was put into effect last summer, passengers have discovered that they can travel to zone 4 on a zone 1 ticket, and those who are making trips between outlying stations have found that they need only pay for the first leg of their trip. This validates DVARP's point from past budget testimony that NPT would merely replace one source of revenue "shrinkage" with another source.

We again call on SEPTA to level with the public and with stakeholders about how SEPTA Key will be implemented on the RRD, how zone fares and fares for via Center City travel will be collected, whether customers will need to hand over cards for validation on board, and whether crews will have enough time to complete fare validation tasks as well as their normal duties relating to train operation.

Ultimately, we believe that SEPTA and its riders will be best served by a fare system where ticket vending machines are available at every station, so tickets do not need to be bought in advance, can have a short validity period to prevent reuse, and can be bar-coded for easy validation and prevention of counterfeiting. Mobile ticketing apps such as the ones NJ Transit and the MBTA are using, and SEPTA is experimenting with, will make the transition easier. We support

mobile ticketing, and recommend that SEPTA include 2-D barcode scanners in future turnstile designs so passengers can show their app at the turnstile.

Vehicle acquisition

There was some controversy over the decision to award the contract for new multi-level commuter coaches to a Chinese manufacturer. We share concern over the award to an unproven supplier, but in several respects, the risks being taken by SEPTA are smaller than the risks on the Silverliner V contract, and we know SEPTA learned from the Silverliner V experience and handled it in a reasonable and transparent manner.

The contract for electric locomotives is much more important, since SEPTA's current fleet is aged and very unreliable. There will be much less risk with that contract, since the locomotives will be very similar to Amtrak's new locomotives, and we understand that production is on schedule.

We look forward to the replacement of the Silverliner IV cars and continued expansion of the fleet to accommodate increased ridership. It is essential that these and all commuter cars SEPTA orders in the future be equipped with rest rooms. SEPTA is the only commuter railroad in the country that fails to provide its riders with this basic amenity. This is not only an issue of customer convenience, but a safety issue as well. As we have seen in both the Philadelphia area and in New York recently, the need to find a bathroom during an extended travel delay will cause passengers to disobey crew instructions, open emergency exits, and go out onto the tracks, putting themselves and others at risk and complicating rescue and repair operations.

We suggest that the next fleet of SEPTA MU cars be configured as three-car motor-trailer-motor sets. This should simplify design, reduce cost, and allow for rest rooms, ADA seating, and convertible bicycle space to be included in the center car of each set.

DVARP supports SEPTA's current bus fleet renewal strategy. With current usage patterns and projected energy costs, diesel-electric hybrids are the most cost-effective buses SEPTA can purchase for its main fleet. We support acquisition and testing of straight electric buses, but do not recommend a wholesale changeover until their reliability and cost-effectiveness is proven.

Service enhancements

We support continued expansion of park/ride capacity at stations where ridership is constrained by inadequate parking availability. While it would be desirable for more riders to use local bus routes, bicycling and other modes to access the station, many riders need to drive so they can drop off children or link other trips to their trip to the station; and SEPTA must respond to customers' needs.

We support the various station renovation projects on the Paoli/Thorndale line. These will support continued growth in ridership. We still urge SEPTA to develop a coherent line-by-line plan for converting stations to high platforms for faster boarding and detraining. We also support construction of a new station and parking garage at Noble, which should relieve some of the parking problems at Jenkintown and Glenside.

We support the audio-visual and public address projects. We urge SEPTA to prioritize count-down clocks on the Market-Frankford line under this program. With the present unreliable service due to the M-4 car shortage, passengers more than ever want to know how soon the next train will arrive. Advances in wireless communications and real-time data on SEPTA vehicle locations should allow for new technology to make countdown clocks faster and cheaper to install.

Essential projects and programs

We commend SEPTA for being one of the first passenger rail systems in the country to come into virtually full compliance with Positive Train Control mandates.

We have reviewed SEPTA's leases, bonds, and other financial obligations, and can report to you that they are not excessive and do not threaten the Authority's financial stability.

We are concerned about the continued escalation of Amtrak trackage rights demands, and the lack of commensurate investment in the infrastructure Amtrak's commuter partners rely on. We spoke of this issue in our statement on the NEC Future plan, and will continue to press Amtrak for action when we meet with their executives.

We support SEPTA's continued efforts toward energy conservation and sustainability. We commend SEPTA for finding opportunities for public/private partnerships that guarantee operating cost savings.

We support the 30th Street to Phil Interlocking improvements and commend SEPTA for including a new layoff track at Civic that will allow more Reading-side trains to serve University City. We also commend SEPTA for heeding our concerns about the scheduling and impact of the project on riders. As we look forward to increased service systemwide as well as at University City, we are concerned about capacity of the Main Line between Suburban Station and 30th Street. Morning peak arrivals at 30th Street are too often delayed because of train congestion.

We find that SEPTA is making acceptable progress in making the system accessible to the disabled.

We support the bus turn alerting system and support increased emphasis on pedestrian safety around rail lines. We have urged local police to take appropriate action against trespassers on the SEPTA right of way. We still recommend that SEPTA begin work on a grade separated pedestrian crossing at Fern Rock Transportation Center, where there is a substantial trespassing problem.

Budget documentation and transparency

The documentation of projects in the Capital Budget is satisfactory. SEPTA has heeded DVARP suggestions and provided increased details of component projects in "grab-bag" programs like the Infrastructure Safety Renewal Program. This helps the public understand what they are getting in return for their capital investment and monitor progress in returning SEPTA's physical plant to a state of good repair.

We look forward to seeing SEPTA's first Transit Asset Management Program report, and request an opportunity to see and comment on a draft version. While complying with federal regulations, this also fulfills a recommendation we have made several times in past Capital Budget testimony.

We are pleased to see a new tabulation of changes to project budgets and schedules in Appendix C of the proposal. This helps interested parties gain a rapid understanding of current capital projects. We ask SEPTA to identify instances where the scope of a project changes during the year, and suggest using footnotes to add this information, since it will be hard to fit it into the table format. We also ask SEPTA to provide a table listing changes to capital project costs between the budgeted amount and the final amount. This will allow the public to see which projects had cost overruns and which came in under budget.

SEPTA should provide a table of upcoming service disruptions

While everyday riders will usually be bored by the details of the Capital Budget, and trust DVARP to scrutinize it, they do care greatly about how capital projects will affect their train and trolley service. For this reason, we recommend that SEPTA add another appendix to each year's budget proposal spelling out the anticipated service disruptions that will be necessary to carry out capital projects. The appendix should list projects scheduled to be carried out in the 18 months beginning with the March when the proposed budget is released to the public.

Disclosure of projected service disruptions will give stakeholders like DVARP an opportunity to raise concerns and make suggestions early enough in the project scoping and scheduling process to have a real impact. We have already seen one successful example of this in the rescheduling of the Arsenal interlocking project: the projected Media/Elwyn line partial shutdown has been reduced from eight weeks to four weeks, much of the shuttle busing needed for the Airport Line will be mitigated, and DVARP will be able to provide suggestions to SEPTA for making passenger transfers at 30th Street Station more seamless (we will be holding one of our rider workshops on this topic next month).

We know that project schedules and scope are subject to change, but even a preliminary disclosure of part-time or full-time detours or shuttle busing will be valuable to riders as they make plans for vacations and other activities.

Service Restoration and Long Range Planning

DVARP supports the Elwyn-Wawa service restoration including a park/ride garage at Wawa. This project will expand the catchment area of the railroad into Southern Chester County, reduce traffic on I-95, and provide environmental benefits to the entire region.

DVARP supports the rail service expansion projects described in Appendix B, particularly the King of Prussia rail extension, which is the single most cost-effective rail expansion proposal in the region. We recommend that the King of Prussia branch follow the US 202 alignment from King Manor to King of Prussia. SEPTA will face NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) opposition to this project whichever alignment is chosen, so it makes sense to choose the alignment that will give the greatest return on public investment in the project. Having stations along US 202 will be good for local businesses and for more broad-based economic development in the King of Prussia area. The other alternatives will result in continued concentration of development at the mall complex. Faced with a choice between two alignments north and west of the mall, we have proposed an innovative loop alternative that would serve the markets in both corridors and urge SEPTA to adopt that as their preferred alternative.

We look forward to resumed progress towards restoring passenger service to the Bethlehem Branch, at least as far as Quakertown or Shelly. Dual-mode technology would make this a cost-effective project.

We support the ongoing studies of transit extensions to the Navy Yard and up Roosevelt Boulevard. SEPTA's proposed enhanced bus service on the Boulevard will give us an indication of whether there is a significant market for faster, more direct transit service in Northeast Philadelphia.

Our region suffered from decades of inadequate investment in rail and transit infrastructure. Now that the capital budget is better-funded, SEPTA is catching up with that deferred maintenance and the future looks much brighter for SEPTA riders and the entire Delaware Valley.