

Katharine Kelleman, CEO
Port Authority of Allegheny County
345 Sixth Ave, 3rd Floor
Pittsburgh, PA 15222

Members of the Port Authority Board
345 Sixth Ave, 3rd Floor
Pittsburgh, PA 15222

County Executive Rich Fitzgerald
436 Grant St #101
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

Tuesday, June 23, 2020

Dear Port Authority of Allegheny County CEO Katharine Kelleman, Port Authority Board Members and Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald,

We are living in an unprecedented moment. COVID-19 has now resulted in the deaths of more than 100,000 Americans and has upended our economic livelihoods. This pandemic poses an existential challenge to our shared institutions like public schools, public housing, and mass transit, all of which are critical pathways to achieving social equity, but which rely on interactions in shared public space. As elected officials, we recognize that Port Authority is charged with competing obligations in this moment: to ensure that essential workers and riders have full access to mobility to address basic needs; to call on riders to eliminate all non-essential trips and stay home if at all possible; and to show that transit is safe, that there is a pathway to restoring pre-COVID ridership, and that Port Authority is financially viable.

We further acknowledge that it is in service of this final goal that the Port Authority made the decision to reinstate full fares on Monday, June 8th. However, it is also clear that things have changed since fares were last in effect. Since the Port Authority made the decision to suspend fares, Allegheny County unemployment claims have surged from 12,898 to 102,657, a nearly 800% increase. Applications for public support programs like CHIP, Medicare and SNAP are equally as high.

Accordingly, we ask for the immediate implementation of a low-income fares program, in which low-income riders can show their EBT benefits card in place of fare payment. This is in line with the recommendations of the ReOpen PGH Task Force -- a committee in which the Port Authority was a principal stakeholder -- for "free or reduced cost for transit" to support the vitality of PGH people and places during COVID-19. This policy could be implemented as quickly as

the decision to suspend fares in March, and any revenue loss could be similarly offset with the federal CARES Act emergency transit funding.

To obtain an EBT card, riders must prove that they are at or below 130% of the federal poverty line. Because this program is administered by the PA Department of Human Services, this would not require any administrative cost or burden for the Port Authority. Moreover, it is also worth noting that without a low-income fares program, many riders who cannot afford to pay full fares will not generate fare revenue for the Port Authority. They simply will not ride, even as Port Authority maintains the same costs for operations. In fact, because the Port Authority is given operating revenue at a state level that is commensurate with total ridership, it may ultimately financially benefit the agency to ensure that low-income riders can continue to take transit even in the absence of fare payment.

Marginalized communities continue to experience disproportionate harm from this crisis, both in COVID-related health impacts and economic hardship. Black and Brown communities, low-income residents, older adults, and persons with disabilities are also disproportionately reliant on public transit and have been sustaining Port Authority throughout this crisis. Other public agencies have taken steps to address COVID-19's economic fallout by suspending evictions and foreclosures, by expanding food distributions, by implementing utility shutoff moratoriums, and by expanding healthcare access. Public transit is as vital to life as these other services, and having fares become a barrier to food, healthcare or job access would have catastrophic consequences for our communities and economy.

Furthermore, even as we enter the "green phase" in Pennsylvania, a global pandemic rages at our doorstep and continues to threaten public health. The suspension of fare payment in March and the implementation of rear-door boarding was an important intervention to protect public health by eliminating transmissions between riders and transit workers at the farebox. However, even with partial driver barriers in place, farebox COVID-19 transmission remains a serious vulnerability, and we must continue to take all possible measures to diminish crowding and contact with high-touch areas. Low-income riders are both more likely to still be reliant on transit during COVID-19 and more likely to be paying in cash, which leads to greater front door crowding and more driver/rider interaction. Having a process in place that allows riders to merely show their EBT card to board would significantly minimize that risk.

Finally, we recognize and applaud the leadership of CEO Kelleman throughout this crisis. Ms. Kelleman has been nimble and responsive to the needs of transit workers and riders these last three months. The Port Authority has been quick to secure PPE and offer paid sick leave for transit workers, to enhance cleaning on buses, and to implement rear-door boarding. These measures have unquestionably been life-saving, and have ensured the viability of our transit system and access to critical services.

We ask that the Port Authority continue this responsiveness and implement a low-income fare program to support the economic recovery of our region in our time of greatest need, and to protect the individuals and groups who continue to be most vulnerable to the impacts of this deadly pandemic.

Signed,

[see the full list of Legislators supporting this an emergency low-income fare program here: <https://www.pittsburghforpublictransit.org/local-legislators-call-for-port-authority-to-implement-emergency-low-income-fare-program/>]