

# No Greater Need, No Greater Opportunity

The Time for COVID-19 Fare Relief  
for Low-Income Riders Is Now



**Pittsburghers for  
Public Transit**



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Pittsburghers for Public Transit (PPT) is a grassroots, member-driven organization of transit riders and operators. We operate from the belief that transit and mobility is a human right, and our guiding principles around accessibility, equity, environmental sustainability and labor justice are enshrined in our Transit Bill of Rights. We are committed to empowering leadership from within the community, and in fostering transparency and accountability within our own organization and in our region's public agencies.

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## Introduction and Call-to-Action

Public transit riders in Allegheny County have been hit hard by COVID-19. Transit riders during this pandemic are disproportionately Black and low-income, and experiencing the dueling crises of the economic downturn and the coronavirus. The Port Authority of Allegheny County is a public agency, charged with providing reliable, accessible service to its riders during a unique and difficult moment. Like other public utility providers, the Port Authority leadership must recognize that there is an ongoing emergency, which requires decisive action around fares and service provision to keep our riders and the public transit system afloat.

On March 25, 2020, Port Authority implemented rear-door boarding on all of their vehicles and cordoned off the front doors to all riders except those with disabilities, a practice adopted by many transit agencies in the U.S. to prevent COVID-19 transmission at the farebox. This allowed Port Authority to become a de-facto fareless transit system for two and a half months, until front door boarding and full fare collection was reinstated on June 8, 2020.

Unlike Port Authority, some transit agencies like DC's **Metrobus**,<sup>1</sup> Detroit's **DDOT**,<sup>2</sup> Southeast Michigan's **SMART**,<sup>3</sup> Charlottesville's **CAT**<sup>4</sup>, and the **Greater Richmond Transit Company**<sup>5</sup> have continued to maintain rear-door boarding and still allow all riders to take transit without paying fares. Los Angeles is currently considering a **fareless transit system**.<sup>6</sup> While we understand that transit funding is in crisis, we believe that the remedy is not to extract fare revenue off the backs of those who can least afford to pay.

**Since May, Pittsburghers for Public Transit (PPT) has been calling on Port Authority<sup>7</sup> to enact an emergency low-income fare program. The simplest way to implement this program would be to allow Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) eligible residents to show their EBT ACCESS cards while boarding in lieu of fare payment.**

Passing an emergency low-income fare program is a needed public health intervention for the region's most vulnerable residents, and is an important first step towards addressing Port Authority's own COVID-19 ridership crisis. **COVID-19 fare relief must also be paired with transit service re-allocation to ensure that service matches current ridership needs, to prevent overcrowding and rider pass-ups.** This will also prevent increases in transit operating costs due to increased ridership from a low-income fare program.

By evaluating ridership changes by route as the fare policy changes were implemented and then reversed, we can now see which communities would take transit but cannot afford to ride with full fares in place. Moreover, we now have a clear picture of which communities are truly reliant on transit to access critical needs, *even in the midst of a pandemic.*

The following report will show that there has never been a more equitable, necessary, or affordable time for the Port Authority to pilot its long-stated goal of providing fare relief for low-income riders.

*“Port Authority has just started to collect full fares, but everyone’s economic situation has changed drastically since they last collected full fares in March. My neighbors and friends are already having to decide between paying for their rent, their lights and their groceries. Fares are just one more need that we don’t have money to pay.”*

***My cousin just called me to ask for a bus ticket, because she had to get to a doctor’s appointment in two weeks and she couldn’t afford to pay for the bus fare.”***

—Teaira Collins, Hill District Resident,  
speaking on the Poor People’s Campaign PA Jubilee Caravan on 6/14/20



# I. Full Fares Hurt Allegheny County's Most Vulnerable Residents

The switch to rear-door boarding and fareless operations were instituted to protect riders and drivers during the COVID-19 crisis -- but the crisis is far from over. We are still in the middle of a global pandemic, and Allegheny County is facing a severe economic depression. By cancelling its rear-door boarding and reinstating full fares, Port Authority is inflicting significant harm on the County's most vulnerable residents.

There are currently no available Allegheny County-specific data sets around ridership demographics and transit trip destinations during the pandemic. However, **the Transit app's national COVID-19 ridership data** shows that low-income riders and Black riders have made up the largest categories of stable transit users through the public health crisis.<sup>8</sup>

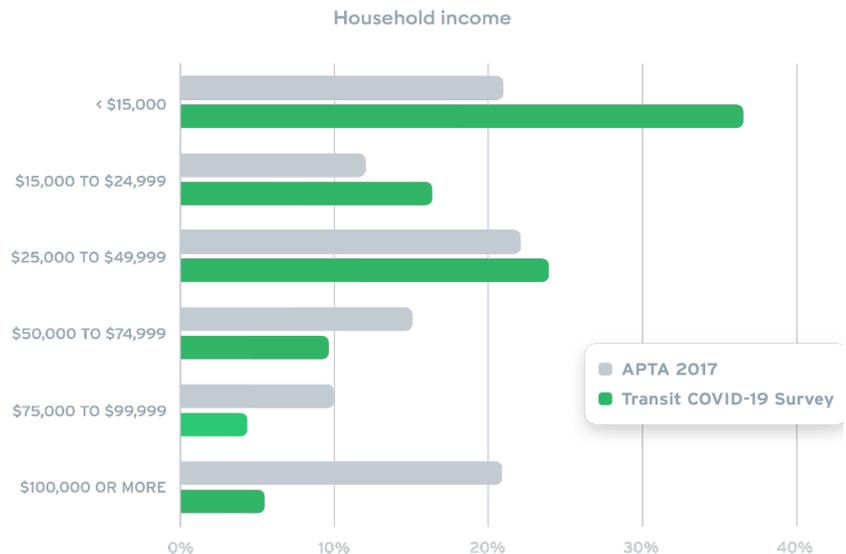
**Approximately 35% of U.S. transit users during the pandemic have annual household incomes of less than \$15,000.**

People of colour are a greater share of riders during the pandemic



Sources: APTA "Who Rides Public Transportation" (2017), Transit survey of US users (April 2020)

Transit riders during the pandemic are poorer

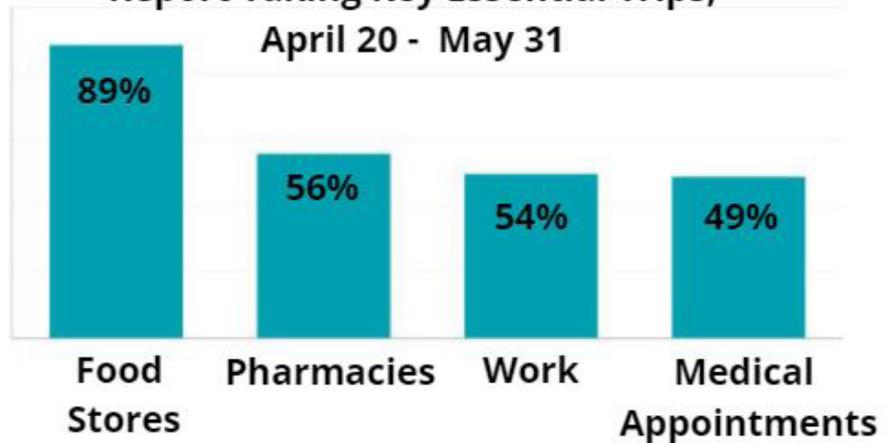


Sources: APTA "Who Rides Public Transportation" (2017), Transit survey of US users (April 2020)

*Transit App COVID-19 Rider Survey Results on Income and Race Compared to APTA 2017 Ridership Data on Income and Race<sup>8</sup>*

The **Washington Metro Area Transit Agency (WMATA)'s COVID-19 ridership survey data** echoes these demographic findings, and demonstrates that **the vast number of trips taken during the pandemic are truly life-sustaining, such as to food stores, employment, pharmacies, and medical services.**<sup>9</sup> Therefore, any decisions around transit service and fares at this time are disproportionately affecting Black riders and low-income riders and their ability to access these essential services.

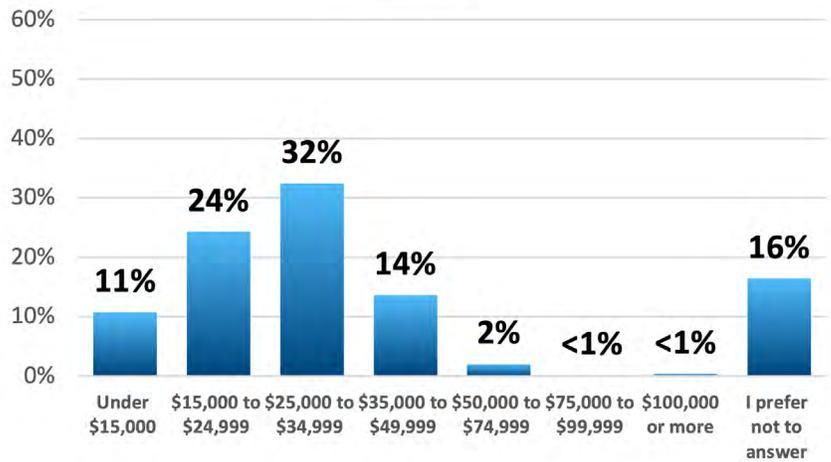
### Percentage of Metrobus Riders Who Report Taking Key Essential Trips, April 20 - May 31



Washington Metro Area Transit Authority (WMATA) COVID Customer Survey of ~650 Riders, Collected April 20 - May 31, 2020<sup>9</sup>

**Public transit in Allegheny County has always relied on low-income residents and Black riders as its primary constituencies.**

### Income



Income Breakdown of Port Authority Riders, from Port Authority's 2018 Rider Satisfaction Survey Draft Bus Report<sup>10</sup>

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, **65% of Port Authority bus riders had annual individual incomes of less than \$35,000.**<sup>10</sup> For low income households, **fares are a huge household expense.**

This is reflected in the fact that several municipalities in Allegheny County have the unique distinction of having **transportation costs exceed housing costs** as the single biggest household expense.<sup>11</sup>

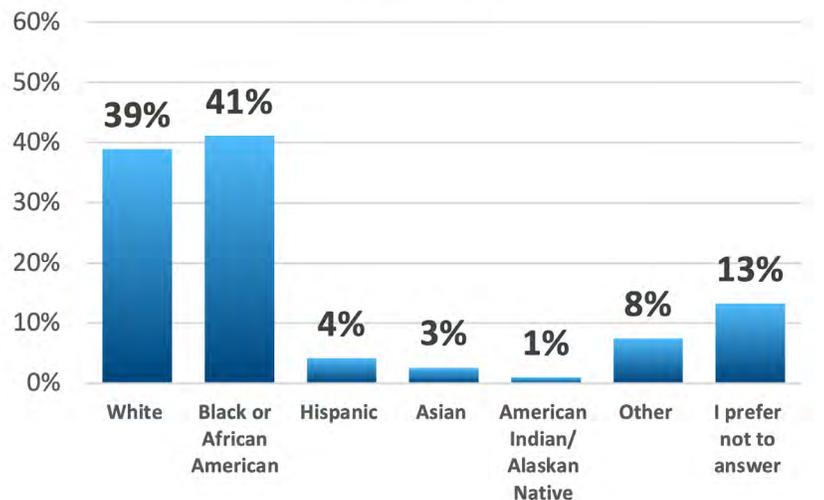
Moreover, a **plurality of Allegheny County transit riders (41%) self-identified as Black or African American** prior to the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> Despite the fact that the Port Authority has not published any rider survey or demographic information since the pandemic began, when looking at which routes continue to sustain high ridership, it is safe to assume that this percentage has only grown. Moreover, it is clear that the economic impacts of COVID-19 have hit Black Pennsylvanians the hardest, and **they continue to see new and continuing unemployment claims disproportionate to their population in the state.**<sup>12</sup> So, it should come as no surprise that the harm of reinstating full fares has been borne more heavily by our Black communities – as evidenced by the **immediate and significant drop in ridership on routes that serve predominantly Black neighborhoods.**

Port Authority Transit cost as % of income, 1 and 2 rider households

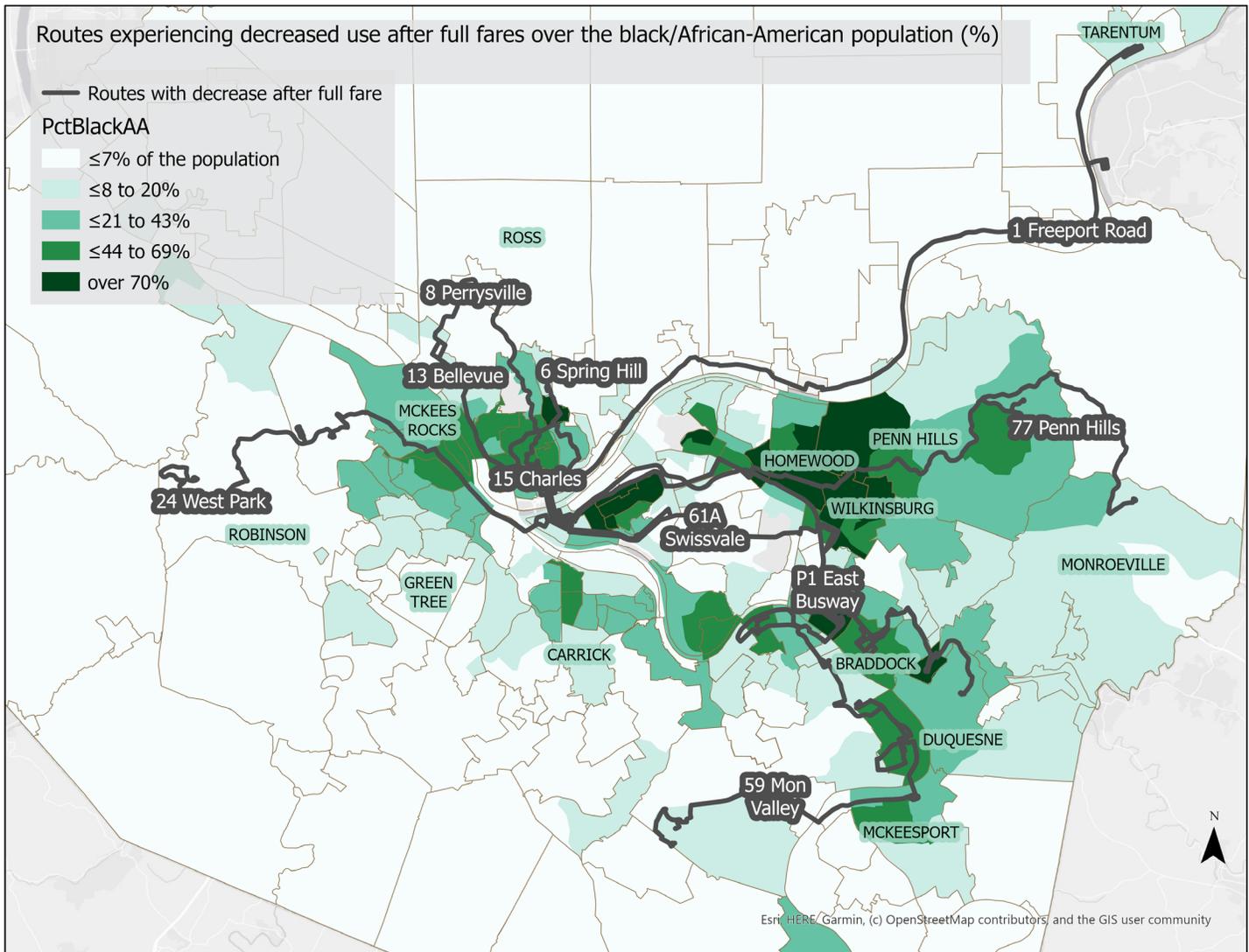


Port Authority Transit Fare Costs as a Percentage of Household Income, in 1 and 2 Rider Households. Based on Port Authority Fare Schedule for 10 rides a week, 52 weeks a year, with a Commuter Tax Benefit for Upper Income Workers.

Race/Ethnicity\*



Race Breakdown of Port Authority Riders, from Port Authority's 2018 Rider Satisfaction Survey Draft Bus Report<sup>10</sup>



Shaded Areas Show the Percent of the Population in Census Tracts in Allegheny County who are Black or African-American. The Routes Shown on the Map Saw a Marked Decrease in Ridership after Full Fares were Reinstated on June 8, 2020 (American Community Survey 2018 & PAAC 2019)<sup>13</sup>

Although the Port Authority has recently **reiterated its commitment to Black Lives**,<sup>14</sup> we remind our transit agency and elected officials that **Black Lives are in fact what's at stake in this discussion.**

In **Los Angeles**<sup>15</sup> and **Seattle**,<sup>16</sup> among other regions, Black Lives Matter Movement leaders have made transit fare relief a key demand in achieving racial justice. Fully-funded, reliable, safe, and affordable transit during COVID-19 is about ensuring that our most vulnerable residents are able to eat, get tested for the virus, buy prescriptions, and go to work in essential industries. It's about ensuring their ability to live. Failing to address the distinct transit service and fare needs for those with no other means to access basic services is catastrophic for our riders and for our region's ability to combat the pandemic and navigate an economic recovery.

## II. Port Authority's Inaction on Fares and Transit Service Readjustments Puts its Own Survival at Risk

### A. Restoring the Riders Who Are Not Taking Transit

Transit ridership is at just **30% of pre-pandemic levels**,<sup>17</sup> and there is no clear pathway to recovering without a vaccine and a massive economic recovery. Pittsburghers for Public Transit and others have **elevated the need to address the transit funding crisis** that COVID-19 has triggered,<sup>18</sup> but the cratering of ridership poses a second existential threat. It is often said that “bus lines are lifelines” for riders, but it’s also true that riders keep the transit system alive.

**We are now 7 months into the pandemic, and 70% of pre-pandemic ridership has not returned. It is also unlikely that these riders will return in the coming year.**

Many large employers in Western Pennsylvania **have shifted to remote working**.<sup>19</sup> **Fears of taking transit**<sup>20</sup> during a pandemic **have led to an increase in car usage and plans for car purchases**.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the Pittsburgh region is seeing **record levels of unemployment** that exceed the national average.<sup>22</sup>

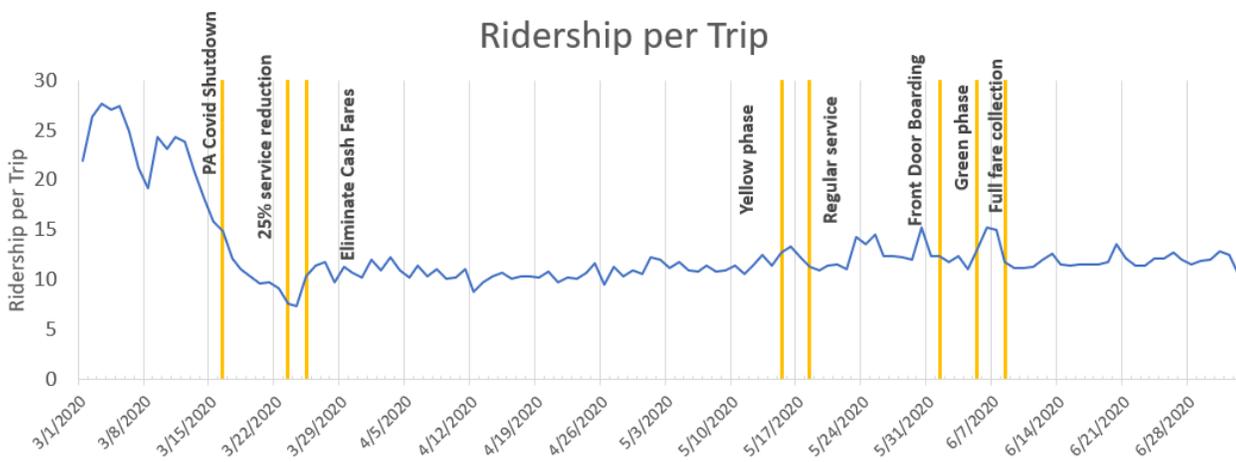
**So how does Port Authority begin to regain ridership during COVID-19, and after it passes?**



*Lisa González, Pittsburghers for Public Transit Emeritus Coordinating Committee Member, at launch of #FairFares policy platform and coalition - February 2020.*

**Port Authority ridership seems to be more sensitive to fare changes than to service frequency changes.**<sup>23</sup>

Transit ridership plummeted in March during the lockdown, falling 74% from pre-pandemic levels. However, the implementation of free fares boosted and stabilized ridership from that low point, even as the Port Authority simultaneously cut transit service across the board by 25%. Conversely, **the resumption of full fares eliminated the boost in ridership**, even as transit service increased and Allegheny County moved to “green phase.”



Ridership Levels Per Trip During the Various Phases of Allegheny County's Reopening, Port Authority data, 3/1/20-6/30/20<sup>23</sup>

**By implementing an emergency free fare system for low-income riders today, Port Authority can boost ridership during the pandemic by 9% - that's 600,000 to 1.2 million additional trips a year.**<sup>23</sup> Port Authority can shift from passively waiting for pre-pandemic riders to return to creating strong incentives for existing riders to take more trips and recoup those riders who cannot afford to pay fares. Not only does the Port Authority have a moral imperative to support rider access to basic needs, but growing ridership itself needs to be a high priority for the agency.

**Emergency fare relief for low-income riders can boost ridership by up to 1.2 million trips per year.**

## B. Maintaining the Riders Who Are Still on Transit

There is a group of core riders still taking transit, but the Port Authority is taking them for granted.

COVID-19 safety measures have been implemented on buses to allow physical distancing, but that has sharply reduced transit capacity. Riders report **regularly being passed up by over-capacity buses**<sup>24</sup> and **waiting for buses that never arrive**<sup>25</sup> as scheduled. At the same time, Port Authority continues to run **commuter service that has little to no ridership**.<sup>26</sup>

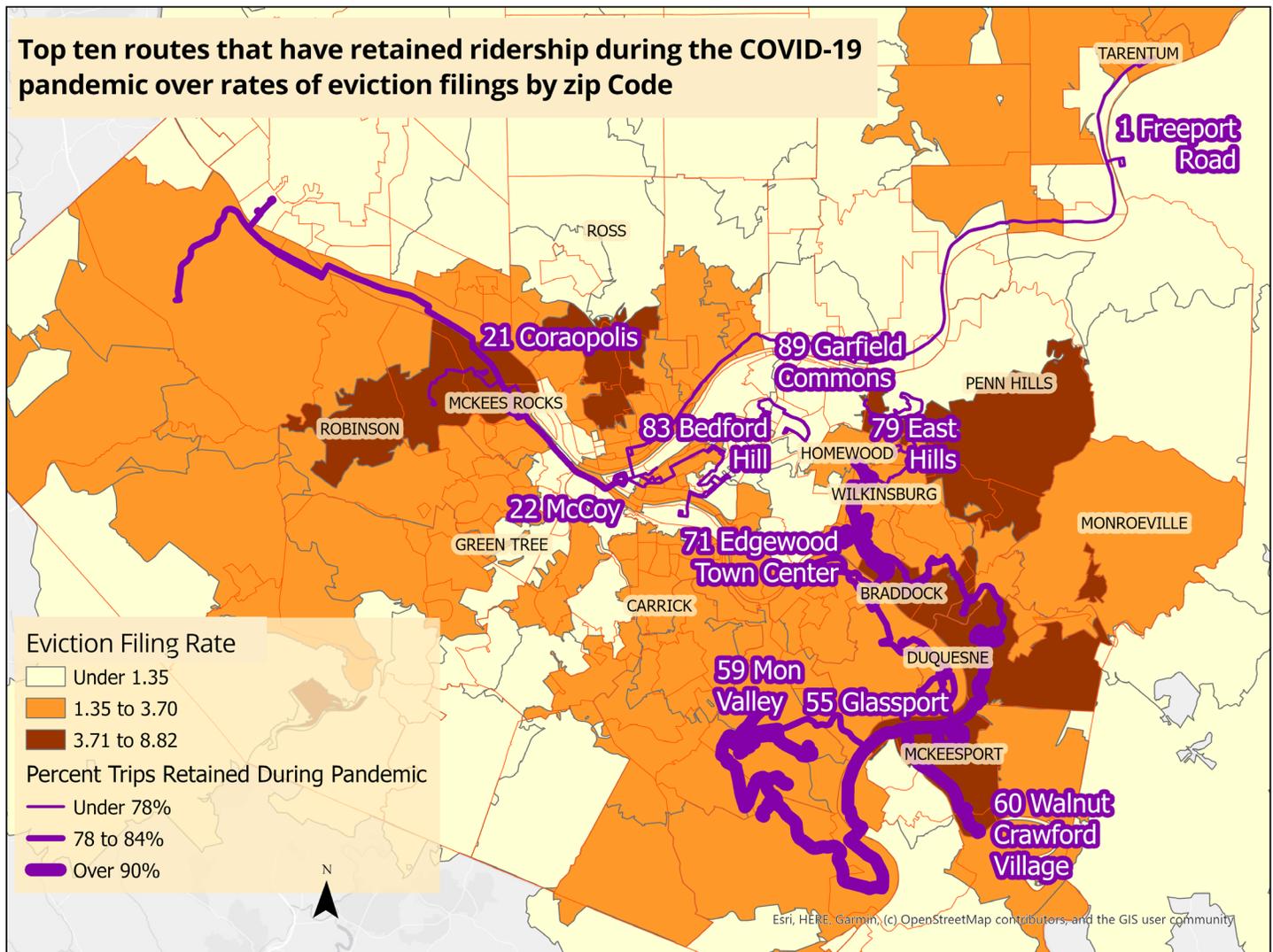
**While the Port Authority eventually needs to bring back commuter ridership, providing service for riders who are not currently taking transit while passing up waiting passengers on other routes is self-destructive.**



Bethany Hallam, Allegheny County Council Member At-Large, together with Allegheny Councilmembers Liv Bennett (District 13) and Anita Prizio (District 3), addresses attendees at launch of #FairFares policy platform and coalition - February 2020.

Current riders are also likely to be experiencing housing instability and may be displaced away from transit due to the looming evictions crisis. Port Authority's board and leadership should speak up for measures to protect renters in Allegheny County from eviction, laying out how eviction-prevention measures additionally support our transit system and riders' access to basic needs.

With smart service re-allocation away from underutilized routes to busier routes and through advocacy to prevent transit rider displacement, Port Authority can retain and support its core ridership. If they don't, these riders will be forced to find alternative transportation.



Eviction filing rate (average number of eviction filings until end of week 37 (2012-2019)/number of renter occupied housing units\*100) by Zip Code Tabulation Areas in Allegheny County (American Community Survey 2018 and Eviction Lab 2020)<sup>27</sup>

**The Port Authority cannot afford to lose the transit riders it's got. Without riders, the agency becomes irrelevant.**

Excerpt from New York Times article. **"We're Desperate': Transit Cuts Felt Deepest in Low-Income Areas":**

[...]

**"For essential workers like Mosi Tibbs, 26, who lives just outside Pittsburgh, the inequality is glaring during his daily bus trip to his job at Trader Joe's.**

**Mr. Tibbs, who is Black and the main breadwinner for his household, has noticed buses on his route coming less frequently, or much later than normal. When they do arrive, they are usually packed and filled with riders who are not wearing their masks.**

**He has considered buying a car because he does not want to risk being late to his job and losing it, or contracting the virus and giving it to his wife, who has Celiac disease. But it is just not affordable right now.**

**"I'm upset I have to make that type of decision," Mr. Tibbs said. "I have to choose between financial stability, and the health of myself and my wife."**

[...]



**Source:** Verma P. Public Transit Cuts Felt Deepest in Low-Income Areas [Internet]. New York Times. 2020 August 15 [cited 2020 September 18]. Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/15/us/virus-transit-congress.html>.

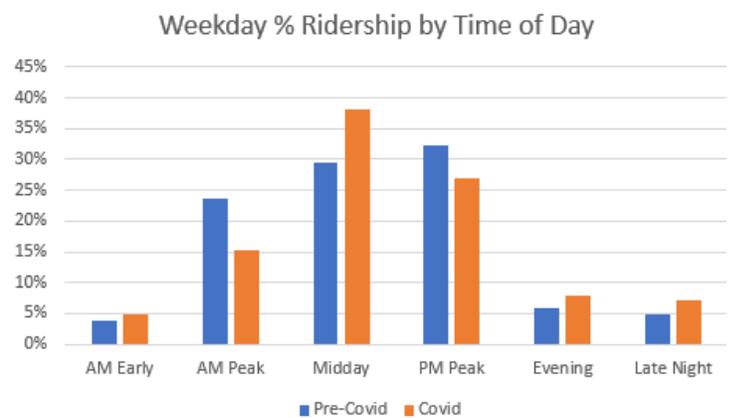
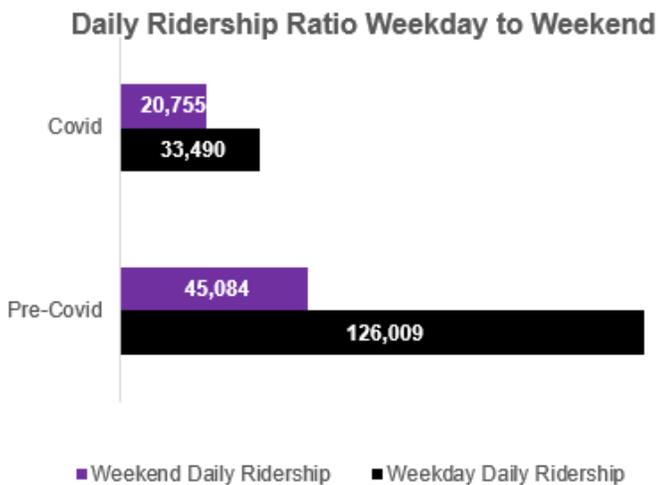
### III. A Low-Income Fare Program Has Never Been More Affordable

***“We have been very clear that we are looking at a low-income fare, but we have to make sure it is useful and durable. There is a great need now.”***

**- Katharine Eagan Kelleman, Port Authority CEO, 5/29/20<sup>28</sup>**

**Port Authority has the unique opportunity to run an emergency low-income fare program with little to no impact on operating costs.** The agency is operating at full service, but with only 30% of ridership. This means that the Port Authority could re-allocate service to higher ridership routes without increasing labor costs or adding additional vehicles. Moreover, **when fareless operations were in effect in Allegheny County, ridership increased most dramatically at midday and on weekends,**<sup>23</sup> when transit vehicles generally have excess capacity.

This mirrors **a study done by MIT**, which found that low-income individuals participating in a low-income fare program took more of their trips during off-peak times.<sup>29</sup>

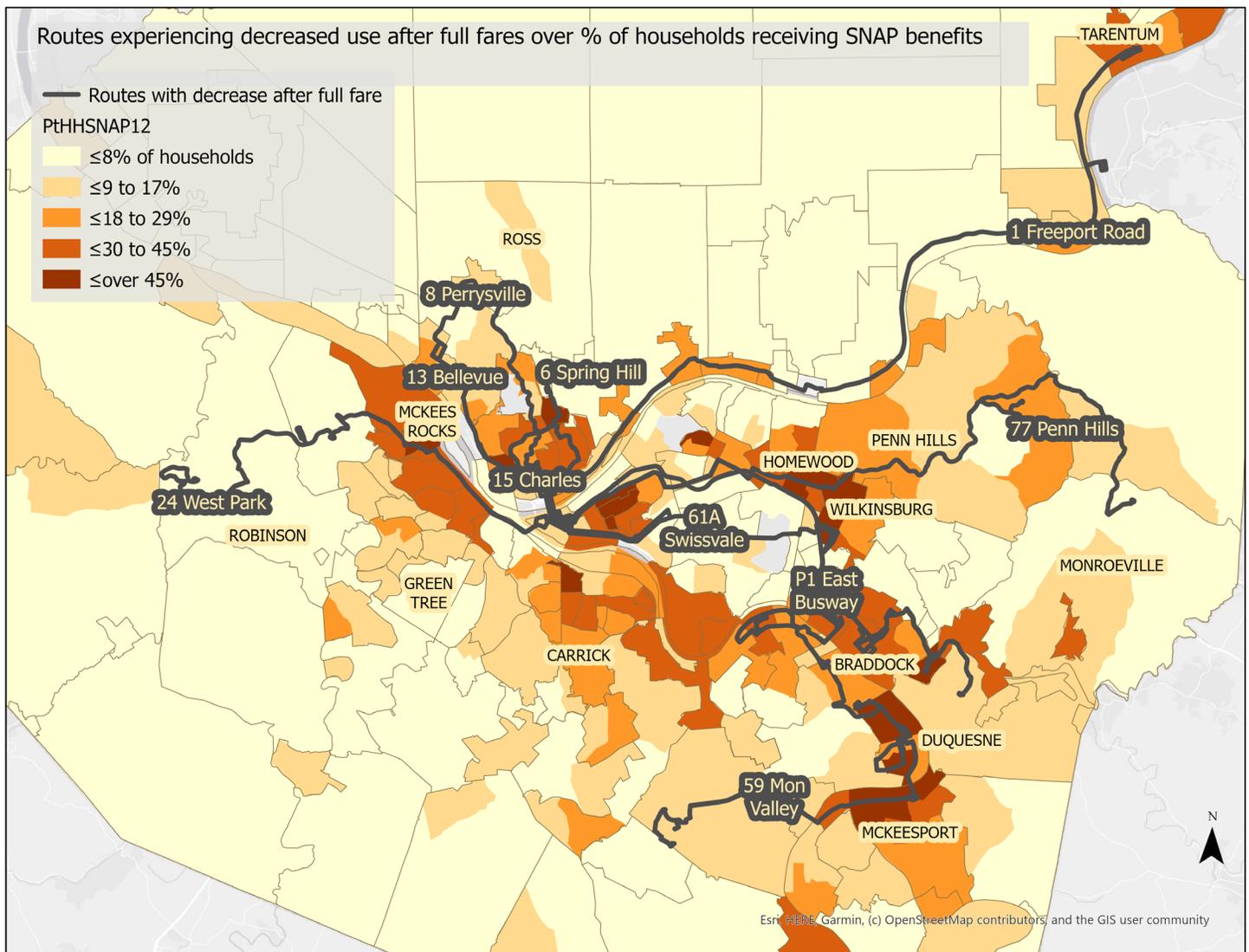


**Left Figure:** Pre to Post COVID-19, Ratio of Weekend to Weekday Daily Ridership Goes from 36% of Weekend Daily Ridership to Weekday Daily Ridership to 62% Weekend Daily Ridership to Weekday Daily Ridership

**Right Figure:** Post COVID-19, the Proportion of Weekday Trips Made During AM PEAK Decreases by 8%, PM PEAK Decreases by 5%, while Midday Increases by 9%.

**Source:** Port Authority Data, Comparing 3/1/2020-3/10/2020 as Pre-COVID-19 Ridership to 4/1/2020-4/30/2020 as Post-COVID-19 Ridership

A COVID fare relief program for low-income residents would be simple to implement. Residents of Allegheny County already provide qualifying information to apply for EBT ACCESS cards through an existing network of social service agencies and nonprofits, so the Port Authority would not have to oversee eligibility for low-income riders. Riders could simply show their cards while boarding in lieu of fare payment, which would also help limit passenger crowding and COVID-19 transmission at the farebox. The map below shows the percentage of households receiving SNAP benefits by area in 2018. We have superimposed the routes that saw a significant decrease in ridership after full fares were reinstated on June 8, 2020. SNAP eligibility is strongly correlated with these routes seeing decreased ridership, and would likely help recapture a significant portion of the lost trips when full fares were reinstated.



Routes with Ridership Drops with Full-Fare Reinstatement Through SNAP-Dependent Communities, (American Community Survey 2018 & PAAC 2019).<sup>30</sup>

**Pennsylvania's state funding formula** takes into consideration the number of annual trips each agency provides.<sup>31</sup> By increasing passenger counts, the Port Authority could potentially recover in state funding some of the revenue that the agency would anticipate losing from fare collection. **Act 89 specifies that transit agencies cannot receive any less funding than they did the previous year,**<sup>31</sup> so the Port Authority will at a minimum maintain last year's funding level from the Pennsylvania Public Transportation Trust Fund regardless of COVID-19 economic impacts.

### **Riders who cannot afford to pay fares are simply not riding.**

In this moment, when transit capacity can accommodate more ridership, the additional 600,000 to 1.2 million increase in trips from an emergency low-income program could potentially generate revenue from the state without increasing operating costs.

**There are a number of unique and fungible sources of funding available that could be used to pay for this program.** We anticipate that fare revenue loss from an emergency low-income fare program during COVID-19 would cost \$4-8 million a year.<sup>23</sup> Because it would be an emergency public health initiative related to the pandemic, Port Authority could recoup lost fare revenue through its \$141 million CARES Act allocation, the county or state CARES Act allocation, and, if passed, the HEROES Act emergency funding relief. The agency can also seek philanthropic support to address the mobility needs of our region's most marginalized residents.

We are in a moment when fares account for very little of the agency's operating revenue. The \$4-8 million dollars needed to implement a year-long emergency free fare program for low-income riders is a drop in the bucket compared to the \$56 million anticipated total fare revenue loss from the COVID-19 ridership decline. More importantly, it is an inexpensive investment in low-income and Black communities and their needs, and one that supports the long-term viability of the institution of public transit for generations to come.

**The Port Authority maintains that they would like to see a long term low-income fare program. Now is the time to pilot its implementation.**



*Briann Moya, Pittsburghers for Public Transit Coordinating Committee Chair, at launch of #FairFares policy platform and coalition - February, 2020.*



*"We know that people in our region are hurting. We have high rates of unemployment. We know that more than 240,000 folks are getting medical assistance, and those numbers are going to continue to climb. We have more than 148,000 individuals receiving food stamps.*

*...We recommend that the Port Authority implement a plan to waive fares based on enrollment in means tested programs, Medicaid and SNAP. The people that use those benefits have easily identifiable ACCESS or EBT cards. They've already documented a financial need to the state and allowing these families to show their card to demonstrate that they need their fare waived will allow them to board the buses safely and quickly without the use of cash. **This is a simple short term solution to achieve equity**, that can be built into a later, better, fare rate plan."*

—Ann Sanders, Public Policy Advocate at Just Harvest, in testimony to the Port Authority Board of Directors on 5/29/20

**Source:** pghtransit. Port Authority of Allegheny County Board meeting held on May 29, 2020 [video file]. 2020 May 30 [cited 2020 September 18]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSu4cNg7bDo&feature=youtu.be>

## Closing

Public transit is not a business – it is a public good. Ensuring access during this pandemic to food, healthcare, and economic opportunity for low income riders and Black riders is a moral imperative. Transit riders need decisive action on fares and service re-allocation similar to the emergency legislation on housing, rent relief, and eviction prevention being enacted by federal, state, and county governments across the nation. Pennsylvania’s utility providers have managed shut-off moratoriums. Port Authority leadership needs to do the same. The footage of thousands of families lining up at food banks across the county is proof enough that the decision to reinstate full fares forces riders to make a choice between transportation and food. Transit is just as vital as housing, water, electricity, and gas. It is how people access jobs, food, healthcare, and other essential services. Our elected officials must act now to launch programs that recognize public transit’s essential role during this public health and economic crisis.

The Port Authority has said that they are concerned about the impacts of an emergency low-income fare relief on the sustainability of the system. The reality, however, is that public transit is hardly sustainable without it. Our transit system has plateaued at 30% of pre-pandemic ridership. The Port Authority needs its riders – through COVID-19 and beyond. Black riders and low-income riders make up the majority of the agency’s most committed ridership. “Equity” is not just a Title VI obligation: during COVID-19, these protected classes are the ones driving this system. To have a viable and vibrant public transit in the future, the Port Authority must consider these riders’ needs first, and ensure that our fare policies and transit service are not leaving them at the curb, unable to board.



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