

The Shuttle

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Proposed SEPTA Cuts Threaten Regional Rail Service in the Northwest

by Jon Roesser, Weavers Way General Manager

THOSE WHO FOLLOW SUCH THINGS MIGHT know that Phoenix recently surpassed Philadelphia's population and is now the country's fifth largest city. If you don't follow these things, now you know.

These rankings strike me as meaningless. Venice, Italy, and Fort Wayne, IN both have about 262,000 people. Are they comparable in any other way?

In any case, Phoenix isn't exactly playing fair. Philadelphia's 1.6 million people squeeze into 134 square miles. Phoenix's slightly higher population sprawls across 517 square miles. If Philadelphia's were 517 square miles, it would include many of the suburban counties and have a population approaching Houston or Chicago.

That Philadelphia and Phoenix have a similar number of people but vastly different population densities is the result of timing. Phoenix is a car-centric metropolis. Almost all its growth has happened in the last 50 or so years, and it has a skimpy public transit system.

Philadelphia is largely a Victorian-era beast, with a compact street grid designed around the manufacturing and distribution of everything from Baldwin locomotives to Stetson hats. Port facilities, multi-story factories, and tens of thousands of rowhouses are all part of a city that grew mostly during the industrial revolution.

To our great fortune today, as our city grew, two rival railroads, the Pennsylvania and the Reading, built extensive, electrified commuter rail systems. Today's regional rail system, operated by SEPTA, is the legacy inherited from a city that grew up before the ascent of the automobile.

This remarkable network is especially robust in the Northwest, which is served by three lines: the Chestnut Hill East (ex-Reading), Chestnut Hill West (ex-Pennsylvania), and Norristown (serving East Falls, Manayunk and Roxborough). Nowhere else in the region is there a higher concentration of commuter rail service.

That legacy is now threatened.

SEPTA faces a budget shortfall, a perennial problem, but this year things are worse than normal. Ridership hasn't recovered to pre-pandemic levels, and federal COVID stimulus money is drying up fast.

Harrisburg seems indifferent, which is hardly surprising. You try convincing the people of Potter County they should care about mass transit in Philadelphia.

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So SEPTA is now considering service cuts — major service cuts.

SEPTA's bean counters have a hard job: There are never enough beans. And they can be forgiven for contemplating service cuts on routes with comparatively low ridership where alternative routes are (relatively) close by. For these reasons, the Chestnut Hill West line is in their crosshairs.

There are 13 lines in SEPTA's regional rail network, and the Chestnut Hill East and West lines rank 11th and 12th, respectively (the stubby Cynwyd line is the caboose).

Transit advocates make a convincing argument that the lower ridership is attributable to infrequent service. On both Chestnut Hill lines, trains run once an hour, except for a brief window during morning and evening rush when they run every 30 minutes.

In a fast-paced world with ever-changing schedules, an hour between trains is an eternity. So for many denizens of the Northwest, taking the train into town isn't a realistic consideration.

Both the Chestnut Hill East and West are short compared to most of SEPTA's lines, which go out to such far-away places as Doylestown and Trenton. In many ways, the Chestnut Hill lines are like the S-Bahn networks that serve most German cities —except they don't run near-

ly often enough for people to rely on them like Germans rely on the S-Bahn.

Imagine how many more people would use these lines if they could show up to the station at any time of day, knowing the next train was no more than 15 minutes away?

I'm no public transit expert, so you won't hear me predicting that quadrupling train frequency will quadruple ridership. But if we're going to make the case that the Chestnut Hill West line should be spared the budget ax, we should simultaneously advocate for SEPTA to operate the line in a way that would meaningfully boost ridership.

As member-owners of Weavers Way, we have something at stake. All the Co-op's stores are within walking distance of a SEPTA train station. Our soon-to-open Germantown store is on the same block as the Cheltenham Avenue station, which was an important reason why we chose that location. Closure of the Chestnut Hill West line would be bad for the Co-op and the neighborhoods we serve.

Philadelphia's commuter rail system is an extraordinary asset, the envy of sunbelt cities like Phoenix. Future generations of Philadelphians are counting on us to keep it rolling.

See you around the Co-op.

Please consider joining the growing coalition of citizens and organizations working to keep the Chestnut Hill West line rolling. You can sign the petition telling Gov. Shapiro to support fully funding SEPTA and join the coalition's Facebook group (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/747713430212578>).

Learn more at <https://savethetrain.org/>