**Testimony for hearing regarding public transit and transportation**

**August 21, 2013**

**Submitted by Barbara Sieck Taylor, Executive Director, Grantmakers of Western Pennsylvania**

Grantmakers of Western Pennsylvania (GWP) is the region’s professional association for philanthropy in southwestern Pennsylvania. Its membership consists of 85+ independent and family foundations, community foundations, corporate foundations, corporate giving programs, and grantmaking public charities.

Several years ago, an Associated Press article described Pittsburgh’s philanthropic community as an unusually high-impact one due to its focus on two things: partnerships and results. At GWP, we were gratified, but not surprised, by this characterization of how our members approach their work. From Renaissance I and II to the Pittsburgh Promise, philanthropic leaders here have long understood that the region’s challenges are best met through public-private partnerships, with philanthropy, nonprofits, business and government collaborating on solutions.

In 2012, when State funding for public transportation was in serious jeopardy, and recognizing the importance of transit to the economy of Western Pennsylvania, the Board of Directors and the general membership of GWPA overwhelming endorsed efforts to keep this region’s public transit resourced. Transportation is usually thought of as a public-sector responsibility - so why are philanthropic leaders concerned about the bus system? Because philanthropy is in the business of making strategic investments that create a healthier, more prosperous region. Under-resourced public transit can undermine the impact of every nonprofit organization and virtually every grant investment GWP members make. A few examples:

* In 2012, Highmark invested $2 million in the Highmark Local Workforce Initiative to support career development and job training at 25 organizations across Pennsylvania. Nonprofit organizations received funding to help workers get back into the job market and work toward self-sufficiency. Inadequate public transportation could easily derail the ability of those workers to participate in critical retraining. If a single parent has to make multiple transfers and spend two or more hours to drop off children at child care and then get to a training site, how realistic is it to expect that parent to participate? Under-resourced public transportation could make investments in workforce training less effective than they should be.

* FISA Foundation is a national philanthropic leader in promoting full inclusion of people with disabilities. Its grant investments range from education to healthcare, workforce development to participation in cultural and recreational opportunities. But if people with disabilities cannot rely on public transportation, many of them would essentially live under house arrest. Inability to travel within the community would undermine all the grant investments made by FISA Foundation, and all the work done by its nonprofit partners, to ensure that people with disabilities can attend college, access healthcare, hold jobs and contribute to the region.
* Philanthropy is also concerned about how public transportation affects the nonprofit sector’s ability to retain an effective and capable workforce. In February 2012, Greater Pittsburgh Nonprofit Partnership surveyed its 300+ member organizations to assess the impact of possible reductions in transit service. The responding nonprofits, which represented more than 8,000 employees, reported that 32 percent of those employees relied on public transit to get to work. Those nonprofits also reported that if public transit service was reduced, on average, 58 percent of the people they serve would be negatively impacted i.e. they would have difficulty accessing the services the nonprofits provide.
* Roads and bridges are traditionally thought of as a public-sector responsibility, but regional philanthropy can even help advance improvements there. The *Traffic 21* initiative at Carnegie Mellon University was initially funded by Hillman Family Foundations and Benter Foundation to stimulate a partnership that would advance “smart” transportation technology. CMU and its partners use expertise in artificial intelligence, robotics, engineering and other fields to develop new technologies that make the most effective use of existing infrastructure. Among other projects, they have piloted adaptive traffic signals that communicate with one another in real time, using artificial intelligence, to maximize traffic flow. Another team is developing sensors which, when attached to buses, measure vibrations as the bus passes over a bridge, effectively turning the bus into a bridge inspector so that bridges most urgently in need of attention are inspected first. *Traffic 21* demonstrates that philanthropy is well positioned to help the public sector do its work more effectively by connecting people to work on innovative solutions.

Our region is fortunate to have an unusual concentration of philanthropic resources, and there are those who believe philanthropy can and should step in and replace public-sector support. Unfortunately, philanthropy’s pockets are simply not that deep. In 2011, grants totaling some $238 million flowed to recipients located in Allegheny County.[[1]](#footnote-1) Significant resources, to be sure – but in fiscal year 2011-2012, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services alone had a budget exceeding $805 million. In other words, all of the foundation giving to organizations in Allegheny County, for all purposes, would not have covered even one-third of DHS’s budget. Philanthropy, if deployed effectively and efficiently, can enhance the value of public sector investment, but it cannot replace it.

Here is another way to think about the scale of philanthropy. Federal expenditures in 2009 totaled $3.5 trillion. Think of that $3.5 trillion as equivalent to the 102 floors of the Empire State Building. Grants made by all foundations in the U.S. in the same year totaled $42.9 billion. So compared to federal expenditures -- the Empire State Building -- total foundation giving represented the height of a two-story house.

In closing: from philanthropy’s perspective, a sub-standard public transportation system is cause for great concern. The region’s continued recovery depends on a transportation system that effectively gets children to early education, students to schools, potential workers to job training, and employees, including nonprofit employees, to their jobs. We urge Pennsylvania’s leadership to develop a funding solution that ensures robust regional public transportation.

1. Source: Foundation Center [↑](#footnote-ref-1)