A photograph of the United States Capitol building in Washington, D.C., featuring its iconic dome and classical architecture. The image is partially obscured by a blue and maroon graphic element at the bottom.

Testimony of Paul P. Skoutelas President and CEO American Public Transportation Association

Hearing On “Assessing the Federal Government’s COVID-19 Relief and Response
Efforts and its Impact—Part II”

September 30, 2021



AMERICAN PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION ASSOCIATION

Introduction

Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Graves, and Members of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, on behalf of the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) and its public- and private-sector member organizations that directly employ 450,000 transit workers and support several million private-sector jobs, thank you for the opportunity to testify on *“Assessing the Federal Government’s COVID-19 Relief and Response Efforts and its Impact—Part II”*.

My name is Paul Skoutelas, and I am the President and Chief Executive Officer of APTA, an international association representing all modes of public transportation—bus, paratransit, light rail, commuter rail, subways, waterborne services, and high-performance intercity passenger rail.¹ I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss how public transit agencies have used federal COVID-19 emergency funding during the ongoing pandemic.

Transit’s Essential Role During the Pandemic

Transit has always been an essential service, providing mobility options for Americans, supporting economic growth, improving the environment, making our roads safer for drivers and pedestrians, and serving critical roles during natural disasters and other emergencies. When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the lives of every American, transit served as an essential lifeline. Public transportation systems brought healthcare professionals to the frontlines, delivered groceries and medicine to at-risk populations, and connected essential workers to their

¹ APTA members include public transportation systems; planning, design, construction, and finance firms; product and service providers; academic institutions; state transit associations; and state departments of transportation.

places of work. Some agencies even provided exceptional services such as delivering COVID-19 tests or retrofitting buses into Wi-Fi hotspots to help students who would otherwise have difficulty accessing remote learning.

Given official declarations to close businesses and impose stay-at-home orders, as well as other measures such as a dramatic increase in remote work, public transit agencies across the nation faced severe ridership declines and state and local revenue losses. Public transportation continued to serve our communities despite significantly increased operating costs and dramatically reduced sources of funding, including fares and other revenues. In most places, fare collection was suspended for safety reasons. State and local transit funding was diverted to address other COVID-related needs. Most significantly, transit workers served as heroes on the front lines. The public transit industry directly employs 450,000 workers, and I would be remiss if I did not mention the significant toll that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on transit agencies' frontline employees—545 transit workers have been lost to COVID.

We thank Congress for recognizing transit's essential role by passing emergency legislation to provide significant support for transit operating costs that was essential for the very survival of many agencies. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA), and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP) each provided critical support for public transportation. COVID relief funds helped stabilize agency budgets, which allowed them to continue their capital and construction programs, maintain jobs, and help the economy recover.

According to a recent APTA survey, almost one-half of public transit agencies (44 percent) stated that COVID-19 emergency funding helped them avoid a complete shutdown of service. In addition, the overwhelming majority of agencies said that COVID-19 funding helped them avoid layoffs (77 percent) and furloughs (79 percent).²

In addition, COVID-19 relief funding has enabled public transit agencies to ramp up service as people start traveling more and return to offices. Today, two-thirds of public transit agencies (65 percent) are operating at 75 percent or more of their pre-pandemic service levels.³

Emergency federal funding was vital to keeping public transportation systems operating, but this does not mean those dollars were used to simply maintain pre-pandemic functions. Transit agencies pivoted to address urgent needs during the pandemic, such as:

- Redesigning routes and revising schedules to better serve riders who most heavily rely on transit;
- Keeping transit workers on the job, often deploying employees in different jobs that had become priorities due to COVID-19;

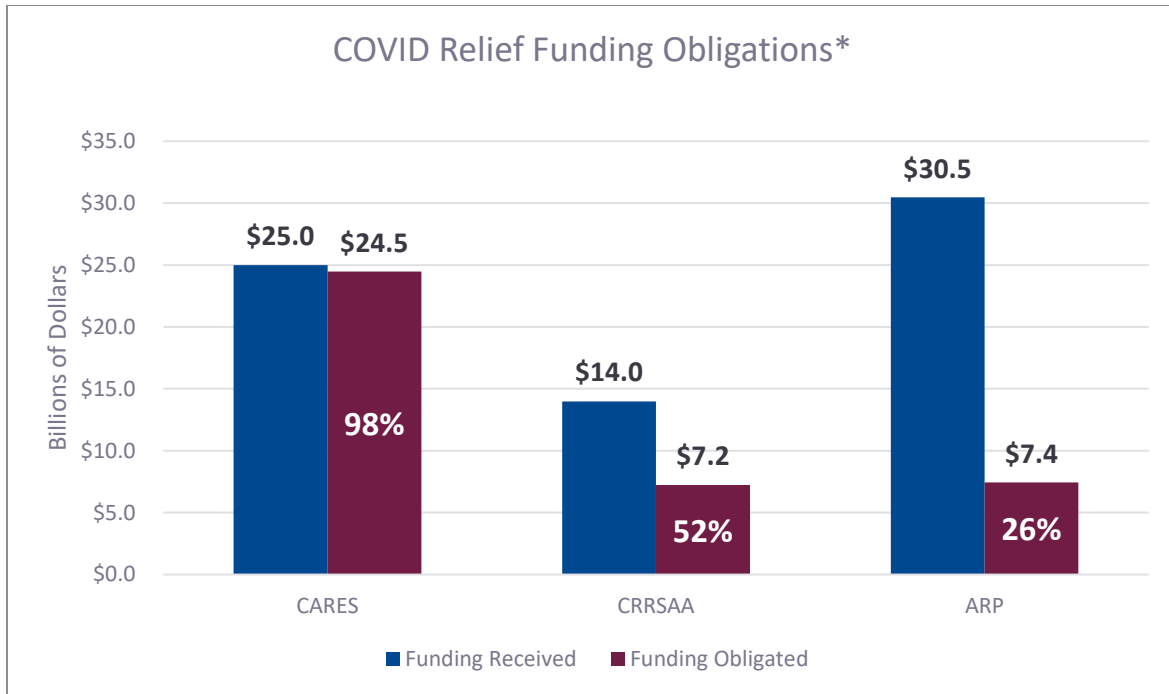
² APTA Policy Brief, *Covid Relief Funding Critical to Transit Survival* (APTA Policy Brief) (July 2021), at 2. This survey was conducted of APTA transit agency members in July 2021. One hundred thirty-six (136) members responded to the survey, with those agencies carrying more than three-quarters of U.S. transit ridership.

³ *Id.* at 1.

- Reallocating resources to ensure essential workers—such as front-line responders, health care employees, pharmacists, hospital staff, grocery store clerks, and community service providers—could reach their places of employment;
- Delivering meals and critical supplies to those without resources and carrying individuals with chronic health issues to life-saving treatments; and
- Ensuring that vaccines were available to transit employees as soon as they were eligible, and providing free, convenient travel to vaccination sites for the general public.

Transit agencies are investing these emergency funds in services that are absolutely vital in their communities. To date, public transit agencies have obligated 98 percent of CARES Act funding. Transit agencies have also obligated more than one-half of CRRSAA funds and one-quarter of ARP funds. According to APTA’s survey, one-half of responding agencies (51 percent) expect to exhaust all of their COVID-19 relief funds by January 2023 and the vast majority of agencies (82 percent) expect to expend all of their funds within the following year.⁴

⁴ *Id.* at. 3.



**Please note that the percentages obligated represent the percentage of formula funds allocated under the COVID-19 emergency funding acts.*

There should be no doubt that COVID-19 emergency funding was critical to the survival of transit service during the pandemic. Agencies that responded to our survey had this to say about the impact of COVID emergency funding:

- “COVID relief funding has prevented the outright cancelation of our commuter bus program. It has also been a valuable tool to pay front-line staff to self-isolate/quarantine when they showed symptoms of COVID. As a result, we have had no outbreaks amongst staff that have been tied to work.”

- “The biggest benefit we saw was the preservation/continuation of employment and pay for our employees and contract teams, and the provision of essential service to our community (especially essential workers).”
- “COVID-related funding has been a major factor in being able to pay for PPE, purchase of ion electric cleaners, driver compartment plexiglass barriers, adding bus/facility cleaners for heightened cleaning to keep our employees and the public as safe as possible.”

Finally, one agency summed it up as follows: “Receiving the CARES, CRRSAA, and ARP monies literally saved our region’s public transportation system.”

APTA members have also done their part in ensuring that their systems were ready to welcome passengers back, as detailed below.

APTA Safety & Health Commitments Program

At the outset of the pandemic, APTA members established a Mobility Recovery & Restoration Task Force, which developed a Health & Safety Commitments Program for public transportation agencies to implement in their own communities. The goal was simple: control the spread of COVID-19, keep the riding public and our own workers healthy and safe, and win back public trust. The APTA program consists of four commitments to specific practices and policies for both transit agencies and transit users to follow:



Our Commitments To Health & Safety

Our system has joined public transit agencies across the country in committing to making every ride safer — and we need your help.



To learn more about APTA's Health and Safety Commitments Program, visit apta.com/commitments

More than 200 public transit agencies participate in this program, helping to protect millions of people every day.

Keeping buses on streets and trains on rails—where and when they were needed most—was our mission, but we also needed to make sure these operations were safe for passengers and transit employees.

As a result of our agencies’ concerted efforts, ridership continues to climb, albeit slowly. According to the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), some smaller transit systems are reporting ridership nearing 80 percent or more of pre-pandemic levels.⁵ This is a positive development to see riders return as public transit is essential for economic recovery and the nation’s well-being.

Transit Agencies Helping Vaccinate Americans

Public transportation agencies and organizations are helping people get to COVID-19 vaccination sites by providing free rides, and in some cases, transit facilities have become vaccination clinics. These efforts have been made possible because of federal emergency funding provided to the public transit industry. There are countless examples of transit agencies going above and beyond the call of duty to help in the vaccination effort, and I will describe a few here.

⁵ See FTA Press Release, [Americans Riding Public Transportation in Greater Numbers](#) (July 21, 2021).

The Tri-State Transit Authority (TTA) (Huntington, WV) has partnered with the Cabell-Huntington Health Department to provide free rides to and from any vaccine clinic in Cabell County, available on any TTA bus or dial-a-ride service.

The Jacksonville Transportation Authority (JTA) (Jacksonville, FL) partnered with a non-profit health center to provide “Wellness on Wheels”, a mobile vaccination service to bring the COVID-19 vaccine directly to seniors and at-risk citizens throughout Jacksonville, specifically targeting areas where there are gaps in health equity.

In May, the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) reported that its state’s transit systems had taken more than 8,500 residents to vaccine appointments. It credited federal COVID-19 emergency funds for enabling 82 North Carolina transit agencies to provide rides to vaccine sites.⁶

The Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) (San Jose, CA) offered free rides on its buses and light rail to Levi’s Stadium in Santa Clara, which hosted a mass vaccination site. VTA also increased the frequency of seven bus routes to help relieve the impact of passenger pass-ups due to limited capacity necessitated by the requirements to social distance.

⁶ According to NCDOT, “Since January, NCDOT and NCDHHS have been administering \$2.5 million in Coronavirus Relief Funding to local transit agencies in every county. The funds are being used to offset the operating costs associated with transit rides to and from vaccination sites for people who are receiving or assisting someone in receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. To date, 82 transit agencies have reported using the federal funds to take people to and from vaccine sites in North Carolina. Those agencies have traveled more than 100,000 miles to take people to vaccine appointments.”

<https://www.ncdot.gov/news/press-releases/Pages/2021/05-11-2021-transit-agencies-8500-vaccine-sites.aspx>

Again, there are countless other examples of transit agencies supporting their communities in this way, and the work is ongoing across the country.

Transit's Essential Role in Rebuilding our Economy

As the nation emerges from the ongoing COVID-19 public health emergency, transit is poised to be a key driver of building a 21st century transportation system that will support economic recovery, address equity and climate change, and increase our global competitiveness. Transit ridership continues to climb each month. Three months ago, national transit ridership was at 50 percent of pre-pandemic levels. Today, transit ridership is almost two-thirds (63 percent) of 2019 levels. Increasing transit ridership is expected to continue as Americans return to offices and become more comfortable resuming normal activities.

I again express our deep gratitude for the federal COVID-19 emergency funding that supported operations during a time that posed an existential threat to public transit. While the COVID-19 emergency support was designed to support the *operating* budgets of transit agencies,⁷ we look forward to continuing to work with Congress to invest in transit *capital* programs. APTA strongly supports the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), which makes critical investments to surface transportation infrastructure, including \$107 billion for public transportation and \$102 billion for commuter rail, Amtrak, and other high-performance rail. APTA also strongly supports this Committee's title of the Build Back Better Act, which creates a new, innovative program to provide \$10 billion for competitive grants for public transit access to

⁷ According to APTA's July 2021 survey, 90 percent of transit agencies have used their COVID emergency funding exclusively or mostly for operations.

affordable housing and to enhance mobility for low-income riders and residents of disadvantaged communities.

Taken together, these critical investments in public transportation prioritize equity, health, job creation, and climate action. Investing in public transit will significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, improve air quality and public health, and help transform our nation's transportation network for a sustainable future. Together, the bills reflect key pillars of APTA's Surface Transportation Authorization Recommendations,⁸ addressing the \$105 billion state-of-good-repair backlog and providing the necessary investment to meet the growing and evolving demands of our communities.

We believe that passing both the IIJA and the Build Back Better Act will provide the transformational investment in infrastructure that the country so desperately needs to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and thrive in the future.

Conclusion

On behalf of APTA, thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify about the tremendous work that transit agencies have been doing throughout this pandemic. Public transit will continue to be essential for our economic recovery. We stand ready to work with you on these important infrastructure initiatives and other issues related to public transportation.

⁸ In October 2019, the APTA Board of Directors adopted [APTA's Recommendations on Surface Transportation Law](#). The *Recommendations* detail a funding proposal and programmatic reforms that will create or sustain more than two million jobs.