



STATE OF DELAWARE
STATE COUNCIL FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
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May 18, 2012

Mr. Shailen Bhatt, Cabinet Secretary
Delaware Department of Transportation
800 Bay Road
Dover, DE 19901

RE: Paratransit Services

Dear Secretary Bhatt:

I write on behalf of the State Council for Persons with Disabilities (SCPD) after reviewing the attached article in the Delaware State News regarding paratransit and the recommendations from the *Report on Conditions, Planning and Revenue Options for the Support of the Transportation Trust Fund*. SCPD is concerned with the following issues that are referenced in the article and/or the aforementioned report:

- Trimming costs of paratransit services;
- Increasing fares of paratransit services for trips within and outside the ADA mandated area;
- Shifting funding sources to the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) since paratransit “provides a social service”.

SCPD realizes that fares have not increased since 1990 and costs far outweigh revenue for this service. However, we agree with you that “we have to be very sensitive to the fact that most of the people who make the decisions about transit are not generally people who use the service.” In addition, Council strongly disagrees that paratransit is a social service and concurs with you that moving funds to the General Fund or DHSS would simply “put a strain on another part of the budget and would do little to solve the problem.” As you know, paratransit service for individuals with disabilities is a civil right protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) – it is a transportation service, not a social service, used by people with disabilities to get to work, healthcare appointments and everyday activities just like everyone else.

Council also agrees with you that these issues and any changes which may impact paratransit need to be discussed with users of the system. Consistent with that approach, SCPD welcomes the opportunity to meet with you and/or be a resource to facilitate appropriate communication between stakeholders (e.g. workgroup, public hearing) to discuss these most important issues regarding the transportation system in Delaware.

Thank you for your consideration and please contact me with your predispositions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Daniese McMullin-Powell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'D'.

Daniese McMullin-Powell, Chairperson
State Council for Persons with Disabilities

cc: Members of the Joint Finance Committee
Members of the Joint Committee on Capital Improvement
Ms. Rita Landgraf
Ms. Lauren Skiver
Ms. Bonnie Hitch
Mr. Lloyd Schmitz
Developmental Disabilities Council
Governor's Advisory Council for Exceptional Citizens

dte/paratransit social service 5-12

Rising paratransit costs a squeeze on state budget

Report says DelDOT service 'the most generous' in the country

By Jessica Eisenbrey

Delaware State News

DOVER — With costs for the program exceeding \$50 million in 2011, paratransit has become one of the most expensive services offered by the state.

Paratransit ridership in Delaware has increased 70-percent since 2003 and the costs have gone up 120-percent in that same time period.

"Those are big numbers," said Delaware Department of Transportation Secretary Shailen Bhatt.

As the state's population ages, paratransit ridership is expected to increase by at least 11-percent each year, said a 2007 study by the University of Delaware.

At the same time, the program hasn't seen a fare increase since 1990.

Paratransit riders now pay just \$2 each way for trips to the grocery store, doctor's appointments, recreational activities and other destinations.

Each of these trips, however, cost the state between \$45 and \$50 one way.

With rising gas prices and insurance and maintenance costs, the state is forced to make up the difference between the fares collected and the costs of paratransit.

"Every year that these costs increase we have to absorb it somewhere in our budget," said Mr. Bhatt.

Generous paratransit system

Delaware's paratransit system is unique in that it is the only one in the country that does not make a distinction between paratransit services mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and those that are not mandated.

This means that the state provides uniform paratransit service to all paratransit patrons statewide, regardless of location, trip purpose or the actual trip cost.

A report issued March 31, 2011 by the Transportation Trust Fund Task Force calls Delaware's paratransit service "the most generous paratransit system in the United States."

There are three ways in which a person can qualify for paratransit services in Delaware: •The person is unable, as the result of a physical or mental impairment, to independently, get on or get off a bus on the fixed route; or •The person needs the assistance of a wheelchair lift or other boarding assistance and is able to get on, ride, and get off a bus, but such fixed route bus is not available on the route when the individual wants to travel; or •The person has a specific impairment-related condition that prevents travel to or from a bus stop in the system.

Mr. Bhatt said the state has about 8,000 riders of paratransit but a total of 20,000 Delawareans qualify for the services.

While many state paratransit systems follow the federal law which requires that paratransit services only be offered within three-quarters of a mile from a fixed transit route, Delaware provides pick-up and delivery to all eligible passengers anywhere in the state.

"There is no state right now that has the model we have in Delaware," said Mr. Bhatt.

While there are arguments being made about trimming costs of the paratransit services, Ted C. Williams, who chaired the Transportation Trust Fund Task Force said most of those involved in the conversation see the value in the program and don't want to cut these services.

"We all supported it," Mr. Williams said of those on the task force. "Nobody ever wanted to see anything discontinued in the program. It's just that there's a large strain on the trust fund and the trust fund was set up to do capital projects. Nobody wants to cut the paratransit program and nobody's ever proposed anything like that. It just needs to have a proper funding mechanism."

Cost-saving initiatives

The costs of providing the generous paratransit services Delaware offers to its disabled population have steadily increased over the years with about \$18.3 million spent in 2001 and \$50.9 in 2011.

Ridership has increased dramatically with the numbers nearly doubling over the past decade from 541,110 in 2001 to 968,323 in 2011.

These numbers will only continue to climb as the population of the state ages.

Some conversations have started about ways to trim the costs of paratransit in Delaware. One suggestion that has been made by the Transportation Trust Fund Task Force and others is to increase fares. The task force suggested increasing the fares for trips outside the ADA mandated zone from \$2 to \$4 each way and from \$2 to \$3 each way for trips within the mandated zone.

"The cost of a paratransit ride far exceeds the amount that a rider pays," said Mr. Williams. "We're not saying that the paratransit riders should pay substantially more."

Before taking action on this suggestion, Mr. Bhatt said state leaders need to discuss it with those who use paratransit as a primary mode of transportation.

"We have to be very sensitive to the fact that most of the people who make the decisions about transit are not generally people who use the service," he said. "If you tell somebody who relies on transit everyday that we're going to increase their fares by 50-percent that's money that's going to have to come out of some other part of their budget."

Rep. Helene Keeley, D-Wilmington, served on the Transportation Trust Fund Task Force and said she agrees that those who use paratransit should be involved in the discussions.

"That's something that we have to actually reach out to them for," she said. "Of course some will say 'No, we're not willing,' but hopefully some people will say, 'Yes, we value this so much that even though I have a limited income I would consolidate my trips to keep paratransit around.'" A second suggestion by the task force was to move funding for paratransit from the Transportation Trust Fund to the General Fund. Because the program provides a social service, many feel it should be funded through the Department of Health & Social Services' budget.

Rep. Keeley said she supports this measure and feels all of DeIDOT's operational expenses should be moved to the General Fund.

"I feel like the \$145 million that we spend in operation costs should be spent on roads," she said. "I still think we should have the conversation about starting to move some of those expenses to the General Fund. That's really where they belong."

If paratransit were moved to the General Fund, Mr. Bhatt said this would then put a strain on another part of the budget and would do little to solve the problem.

"The pie is the same size. We have X number of dollars available to do things in this state," he said. "If you

See **Paratransit** — Page 4



Delaware State News/ **Dave Chambers**

A DART paratransit bus travels along South State Street in Dover Friday morning. Increased ridership and costs had the Delaware Department of Transportation program exceeding \$50 million in 2011. Paratransit riders pay \$2 each way per trip but it costs the state between \$45 and 50 each way.

Article Continued Below

See PARATRANSIT on Page A04

Paratransit

Continued From Page 3

want to shift something out of the trust fund and move it over to the General Fund, that means the state is not going to be able to do something else. There's no free lunch when it comes to this."

Some groups and individuals studying the challenges faced by paratransit have also suggested privatizing the service would be a beneficial move for the state to take. If this were done, Rep. Keeley said the state would have to ensure current employees of the service were protected.

"We would have to look at what would happen to the employees," she said, adding that these employees are union members.

A private company would more than likely not be able to provide the same services currently offered by the state, argued Mr. Bhatt.

"I think that any private company that would come in here and look at this business model would likely cut services and increase fares," he said.

With the naming of a new Delaware Transit Corporation (DTC) director soon, Mr. Bhatt said he's hopeful DeIDOT can begin serious discussions about the challenges facing paratransit.

"I think the first thing that we have to do is we have to say: what is the service that we want to deliver, what is our ability to deliver that service and is there a more efficient way to do it," he said.

Staff writer Jessica Eisenbrey can be reached at 741-8242 or jeisenbrey@newszap.com. Follow on [Twitter@statenewsjess](https://twitter.com/statenewsjess).