To whom it may concern in the Vermont Legislature,

I am writing this to make what I consider to be important remarks about the transit funding in Vermont as we move forward into 2025.

In 2024, GMTA in Burlington began the process of paring down routes in anticipation of a large budget shortfall. This budget shortfall, while large for GMTA, is exceedingly small against the larger picture of the overall transportation budget. The state transportation budget tightness has slowly whittled the 26 transportation agencies identified in the Rockefeller Center Report in 2009, to what the state has currently in 2024. Areas that were once service more regularly are now, after the latest cuts, transit deserts, with no economic transit options for residents that live in certain parts of the state. Instead of an intentional process of regionalization, there has been a haphazard process similar to the one which took place under act 46. A process which makes addressing VTRANS concerns about ridership levels the primary component of the decisions whether or not a route would stay in or be cut.

Some of the routes that GMTA was forced to cut wouldn't surprise people, some had low ridership numbers. Some of the routes were reductions in frequency based upon the decision to run less routes on non-commuter days, despite numbers that would be very respectable, even celebrated if a rural transit company were to achieve them.

In 2024, like almost every year, GMTA produced a larger overall amount of local dollars to help fund their services, as well as a higher percentage of local dollars than most local transit agencies. They contributed heavily to their area ADA and Medicaid system, services which are mostly funded by the state and federal resources in areas with smaller populations, saving the state money and creating a better transportation product in the towns that are members of the authority.

Every other year there is a report created that identifies where ridership levels are high and low and the costs associated on a rider-by-rider basis, which routinely identifies GMTA as being one of the most efficient on a dollars per ride basis in the state.

GMTA offers almost 50% of the rids and receives around 20% of the state funding or less, and now they are in a crisis of funding, where if the other transit agencies were looking for the same $1.9 million dollars to spread across the other fifty percent of rides in the state, I don't think anyone would be batting an eye at that.

Vermont is a high-cost state, the cost of owning a car in Vermont according to reporting done by VPR is eleven thousand dollars per year. A Vermonter making a little bit more than minimum wage will spend over 41% of their after-tax income on their vehicle alone. This doesn't make a car a sustainable option for many working Vermonters. In a time when Vermonters are more worried about affordability than ever, this would be a perfect moment to take up a strong push for very justifiable public transit funding to help those who currently struggle to afford to live in Vermont, particularly those in the highest cost parts of the state like Chittenden County. The Burlington and Essex residents who will be most burdened by the GMTA funding shortfall are justifiably worried about how the service reductions will increase congestion in the downtown area.

Each year, in the struggle for transit funding, the state transit agencies are coming to the department to fight over transit funds from the general budget, instead of being assigned monies out of a state transit funding model designed to protect and improve transit now and into the future. Two states in New England, and two cities in New York already have a system set up dedicated to providing funding for public transit outside of the state budgetary process. A dedicated funding stream wouldn't mean the end of oversight but would allow transit providers to not find themselves in a position where they need to cut popular routes simply due to funding shortfalls. The state has, over the years, set up multiple funding studies to identify possible ways to fund transit into the future, so the legislature has already taken the necessary steps to set the state up for success.

Finally, this wouldn't be complete without a nod to the people that keep the buses running. Whenever a shortfall begins to become apparent, workers generally suffer the consequences. In the case of transit, it isn't just the riders who will lose access to an economic way to get to work, but the community that will start to suffer once the transit agencies begin reducing payroll via layoffs and buyouts as a way to stay afloat. Once a company gets a reputation for a place where you will be laid off, the company starts to become a less attractive place for people seeking employment.

With the other headwinds that transit suffers from in the employment market in Vermont such as the generally lower than median wages and dangerous confrontations that drivers frequently deal with, a reputation for layoffs will likely begin the doom cycle for what is right now a very viable public transit agency in Northwestern Vermont. The drivers right now at GMTA receive wages comparable to the median wage for the state by the BLS (the only transit agency in Vermont that can say that). Drivers can afford to live in Vermont and can afford to raise their families in Vermont. The transit money provided by the state helps to make GMTA the only transit company that can make that claim.

We hope that in 2025, given all the fiscal tightening, that the state will look at public transit with fresh eyes, and allow the transit system to flourish as an investment, restore the funding and invest in the future of the state, and invest in the future of the workers of the state.

Curtis Clough

President

Teamsters Local 597