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WHY T.R.I.P MATTERS?

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OVERVIEW/INTRODUCTION

Through the work of the House and Senate chief patrons: Delegate Delores L McQuinn (HB 142) and Senator George L. Barker (SB 342) changes to the Transit Ridership Incentive Program (TRIP) intended to increase funding to reduce the impact on public transit fares on individuals with low-incomes were signed into law during Virginia's 2022 legislative session. House Bill (HB 142) and Senate Bill (SB 342) builds on 2020 legislation establishing TRIP to promote improved transit service in urbanized areas 1 of the Commonwealth with a population of more than 100,000 and to reduce barriers to transit use for low-income individuals.

The identified goal of the Transit Ridership Incentive Program as established in 2020,¹ is to increase regional connectivity and fund initiatives to lower public transportation costs to low-income riders by encouraging "the identification and establishment of routes of regional significance, the development and implementation of a regional subsidy allocation model, implementation of integrated fare collection, establishment of bus-only lanes on routes of regional significance, and other actions and service determined by the Board to improve transit service" (LIS, 2022). Language in the 2020 legislation creating TRIP limited funds for reduced and zero-fare transit to 25% of the program with the remaining 75% of the funding dedicated to regional connectivity(LIS, 2022). HB 142/SB 342 (2022) removed this limitation on funding, allowing for greater opportunity to fund reduced and zero-fare transit in Virginia. Per Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (VDRPT) "\$24.5 million to multi-year zero-fare/low income projects and \$5.2 million to multi-year regional connectivity projects has been allocated". An example of such an award was announced in a press release by Greater Richmond Transit Company (GRTC). On December 21, 2021, it was announced that \$8 million was awarded to GRTC to study zero fares. Effective July 1, 2022, the Transit Ridership Incentive Program (TRIP) removed the maximum threshold of funding of 25% and instead established a minimum of 25% of TRIP funding going towards reduced or zero-fare transit initiatives. The proposed percentage of the TRIP funds will continue to support the establishment of programs to reduce the impact of fares on low-income individuals in the coming years. Unfortunately, a sunset clause was inserted as a Governor's amendment meaning this change is set to expire on July 1, 2024. As the original legislation that passed the House and Senate was the result of a strong majority of bi-partisan support, based on the research, an extension of the current July 1, 2024 expiration date, or the elimination of the sunset clause is advised. To avoid the barriers for low-income individuals, it has been noted that "Virginia's program could target low-income individuals through passes or by eliminating fares on certain high-capacity corridors or for entire transit systems" (Pascale, 2021).

TRIP ADVOCACY

Declining ridership and farebox revenues during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic brought zero-fare transit to the forefront of transit policy-making discussions. Despite early declines in ridership, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act of 2020

¹ <https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?201+sum+HB1414>

provided federal funds to transit agencies to maintain operations. After seeing the benefits that zero-fare transit brings to riders, improvements to ridership programs should be consistently reviewed. Morales-Burnett (2021) stated, “The pandemic forced society to understand how imperative public transportation is in a whole new way. Ensuring it is accessible and meets the needs of those who ride it most will be key to an equitable recovery.”

The Virginia Conservation Network (vcnva.org), the Sierra Club, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transport, current and potential ridership, and the Virginia Association of Counties (VACO) were among a number of stakeholders and strong advocates supporting this legislation and presenting data to support. Based on the research of our team, the opposition was related to the program being temporary or permanent. Gordon (2021), “Nearly every transit system in the commonwealth eliminated fares last year as a public health measure in response to COVID, but until recently none had announced intentions to make that move to protect riders and operators more permanent. Based on the response to a request for ideas DRPT issued to transit providers last fall, the list of bus systems seeking to stay fare-free beyond the pandemic could soon grow substantially longer.”

As stated by The Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT), “the Transit Ridership Incentive Program (TRIP) provides funding to transit agencies for the purpose of supporting the deployment of zero-fare and/or subsidized fare pilot programs designed to support low-income communities. These communities will aim at increasing a system's ridership, accessibility, and equity and will primarily consist of providing subsidized or fully free passes to low-income populations, eliminating fares on high-capacity corridors, or deploying an entirely zero fare system.” It is also necessary that completed studies are carried forth to continue with regional implementation as metropolitan and urban areas continue to increase. The National Association for State Community Services Programs indicates that “increasing the local customer base for services such as medical facilities, shopping malls, and local educational facilities, rural transportation can enhance economic growth and economic efficiency” (NASCSPP, 2008). The new TRIP funding formula is necessary as long as public transit investments are needed and until all people in Virginia have affordable and comprehensive access to public transportation.

RACIAL IMPACT ANALYSIS OF HB142 & SB342

When Virginia legislators established the Transit Ridership Incentive Program (TRIP), the legislative language noted the program was created “to promote improved transit service in urbanized areas of the Commonwealth with a population in excess of 100,000 and to reduce barriers to transit use for low-income individuals” (HB1414, 2020). Similarly, the legislative summary of HB142 explains that the bill will allow transit systems to allocate more TRIP funds “to support the establishment of programs to reduce the impact of fares on low-income individuals” (HB142, 2022). While it is clear that the establishment of reduced-fare or zero-fare transit will positively impact low-income people in Virginia, there is no mention of the potential impact on people of color in the state.

Black, Latino, and Asian American people in the state are overrepresented in the population that rely on the bus to go to work. For example, while Black Virginians make up 19% of all working age (16-64) people in the state, Black people make up 36.5% of the total number of people who rely on the bus to get to work. There are similar results when looking at Latino (9.7% working age vs. 16.9% of bus riders to work) and Asian Americans (7% of working age vs. 10.5% of bus riders to work) (IPUMS, 2020).

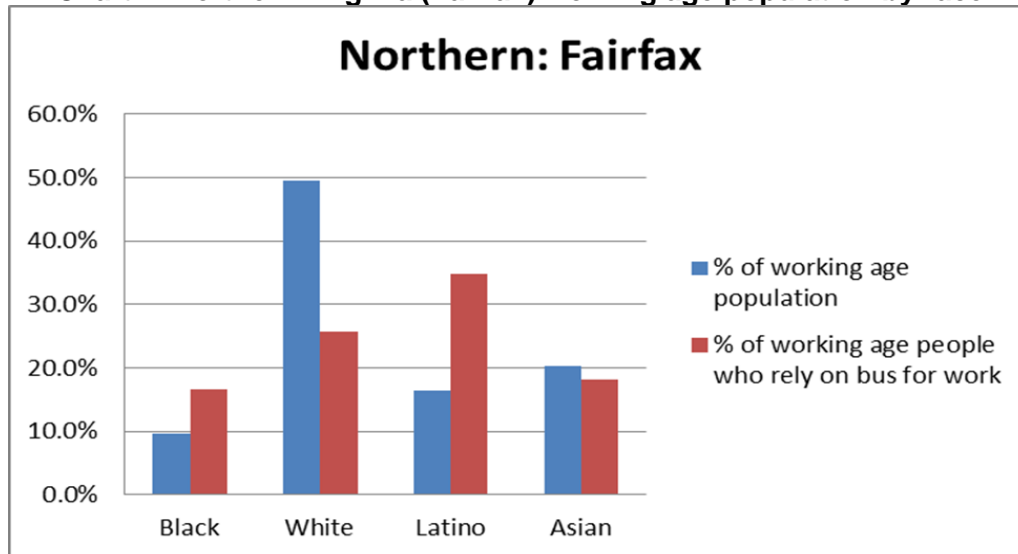
To further understand the impact on communities of color throughout the state, this paper reviews the service areas of four different transit authorities in four regions of the state. To have comparable data throughout the areas, the authors of this paper rely on an analysis of 2016-2020 American Census Survey data. Although demographics, history, and supporting data sources for

each region may differ, it is clear that people of color are an essential share of transit riders and benefit enormously from increased access to zero-fare transit.

Northern Virginia (Fairfax Connector)

In the Northern Virginia region, the Fairfax Connector, which serves Fairfax County, was examined by the project group. The Fairfax Board of Supervisors is exploring the possibility of offering zero-fare transit for riders of the Fairfax connector (Leayman, 2022). In Fairfax, Black and Latino people are overrepresented in the population that relies on the bus to go to work. Latino residents are the third largest ethnicity in Fairfax behind White and Asian residents but account for the largest population who ride the bus to work (IPUMS, 2020). While Latinos make up 16.4% of all working age (16-64) people in Fairfax, Latino people make up 34.8% of the total number of people that rely on the bus to get to work. Black riders in Fairfax are the only other ethnic group overrepresented in riding the bus to work. While Black people make up 9.6% of all working age (16-64) people in Fairfax, Black people make up 16.6% of the total number of people that rely on the bus to get to work (IPUMS, 2020).

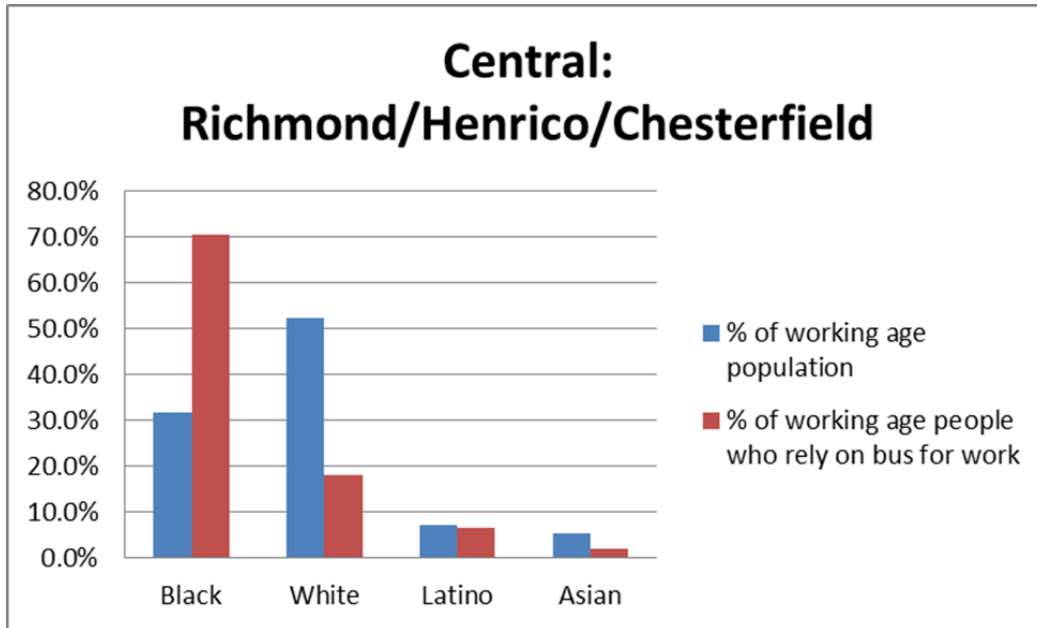
Chart 1. Northern Virginia (Fairfax) working age population by race



Central Virginia (Greater Richmond Transit Company)

In the Central Virginia region, the Greater Richmond Transit Company (GRTC), which serves Richmond City, Henrico County, and Chesterfield County, was examined by the project group. In fact, according to a 2016 study, 78% of all riders of local bus transit via the Hampton Roads Transit system were of a race other than Caucasian (HRT, 2017). In the GRTC service area, Black people were overwhelmingly overrepresented in the population that relies on the bus to go to work. While Black people make up 31.8% of all working-age (16-64) people in GRTC's service area, Black people make up 70.4% of the total number of riders who rely on the bus to get to work (IPUMS, 2020).

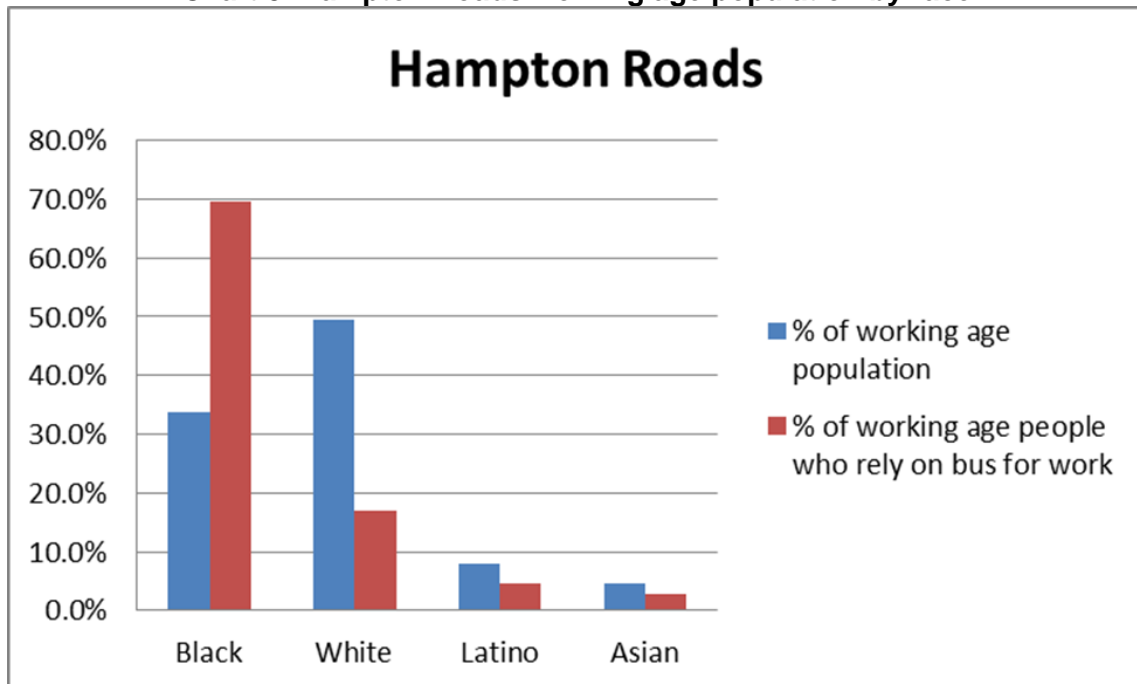
Chart 2. Central Virginia (Richmond/Henrico/Chesterfield) working age population by race



Hampton Roads (Hampton Roads Transit)

In the Hampton Roads region, the Hampton Roads Transit (HRT) Company which serves Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, Portsmouth, Hampton, Newport News, and Smithfield, was examined by the project group. The HRT only offered zero-fare rides up from March 2020 to June 2020 (Gordon, 2020) and highlighted HB142 and SB342 on their website as notable state legislation passed in 2022 (HRT 2022). In the HRT service area, Black people were overwhelmingly overrepresented in the population relying on the bus to work. While Black people make up 33.8% of all working-age (16-64) people in HRT’s service area, Black people make up 69.7% of the total number of people that rely on the bus to get to work (IPUMS, 2020).

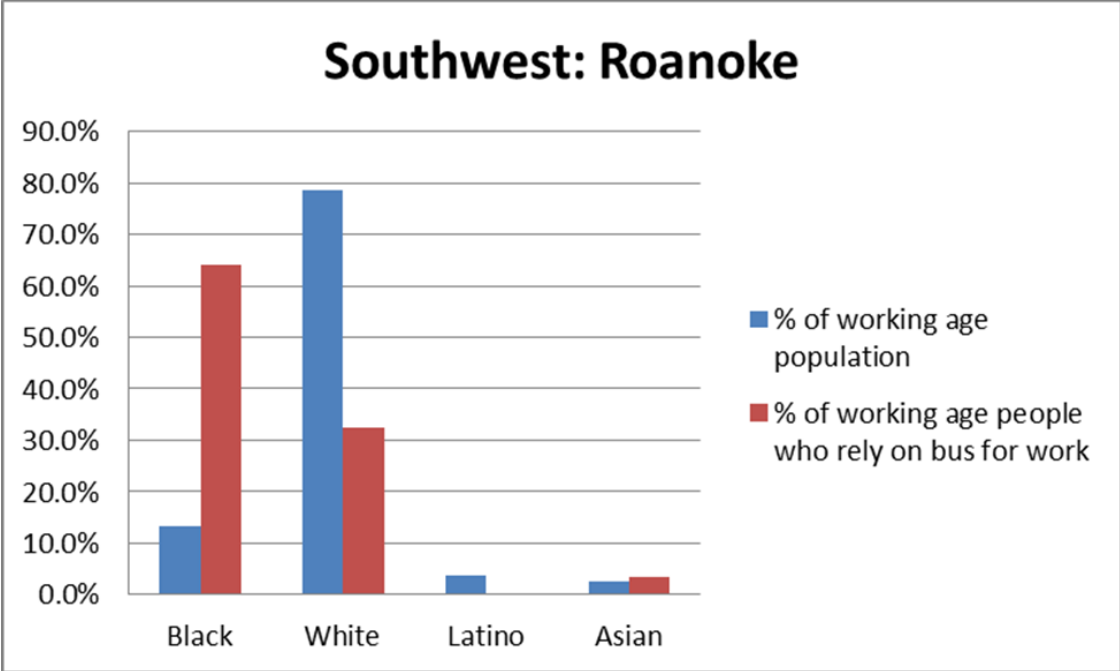
Chart 3. Hampton Roads working age population by race



Southwest (Valley Metro)

In the Southwest Virginia region, the Valley Metro service, which serves Roanoke City, Salem City, Vinton, and Roanoke County, was reviewed. In the Valley Metro service area, Black riders were overwhelmingly overrepresented in the population relying on the bus to work. While Black people make up 13.3% of all working age (16-64) people in the Valley Metro service area, Black people make up 64.2% of the total number of riders who rely on the bus to get to work (IPUMS, 2020).

Chart 4. Southwest (Roanoke) working age population by race



RECOMMENDATIONS AND STRATEGIES

The Transit Ridership Incentive Program (TRIP) was created to improve regional transit service in large urban areas and to reduce barriers to access for low-income people. TRIP has two sub-programs: TRIP – Regional Connectivity and TRIP – Zero Fare and Low Income. Statewide and regional census data, supported by other evidence, makes it clear that if transit authorities throughout Virginia choose to take advantage of the flexibility offered by HB142 and SB342 to create zero-fare programs, people of color will strongly benefit. Based on the racial impact analysis, we provide the following recommendations:

1. Extend Current Funding Allocation. We recommend extending the current funding allocation for TRIP beyond the 2024 sunset clause. The current bill sets a 25% minimum on the use of TRIP funds for both regional connectivity and the zero fare or low fare programs. This funding allocation allows the grantor (DPRT) flexibility in the dissemination of the remaining 50%. We asked a key stakeholder in the Richmond City Office of Equitable Transit and Mobility to share the vision for TRIP beyond the General Assembly’s 2024 sunset clause and the stakeholder stated, “The TRIP program is an equitable arm for growing regional transportation and accessing transportation by low-income citizens.”
2. Reduce local funding requirements. Reduce local funding requirements for the zero-fare and low-income projects. Reducing the local funding requirement will assist localities that did not apply during the 1st and 2nd application cycle, to use the local funds required for the spend down to address some of the other historical disparities in public transit such as low frequency and multiple transfer routes in low-income communities and ensure equity in transit connectivity, inclusive of sidewalks, shelters, direct service, and resource

routes. This will alleviate financial strain on low-income communities while increasing access to jobs, healthcare, and other needed services.

3. Consider Alternate Fair Proposals. According to the National Public Transportation Association, 65% of bus riders are people of color. “While zero-fare transit can bring great benefits to transit agencies and the communities they serve, it is not a one-size-fits-all solution — several other policies and strategies have been shown to provide equity benefits, such as the removal of transfer fees, increased frequency and coverage, or targeted subsidized fares.” (DRPT, 2022) If zero - fare funding could not be maintained we recommend a phase-down transition approach to the TRIP funding period that allows localities to transition from free fare for all to low-income individuals having a free pass, remove transfer fees or implement a low-income subsidized fare program.

As noted in an interview with a key stakeholder in the Richmond City Office of Equitable Transit and Mobility: “Overall, looking at the technical variables behind the TRIP program, the City has begun to better understand free fare is a key driver to GRTC trending opposite of other transit agencies. Richmond’s riders have a huge impact on the additional federal and state dollars coming to the entire Richmond-Petersburg region. These are the dollars that replace the fare costs, equating to almost \$8 million in new dollars last year. If the ridership trends continue, the City and GRTC may have inevitably found a way to pay for free fares for the Richmond region.”

If this approach is working for Richmond City, other localities could also experience the benefits of the TRIP Zero Fare Pilot Program while addressing fare equity, growing ridership, and increasing the allocation of state and federal funds.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the new TRIP funding solution is necessary as long as public transit investments are needed and until all people in Virginia have affordable and comprehensive access to public transportation. Statewide and regional census data, supported by other evidence, makes it clear that if transit authorities throughout Virginia choose to take advantage of the flexibility offered by HB142 and SB342 to create zero-fare programs, people of color will strongly benefit. TRIP is important because it provides local funding, provides for both urban and rural communities with an expanded scope of ridership. It provides access to jobs, education, hospitals, and additional funding. Such recommendations to HB142 and SB342 prove the importance of the program. For instance, the extension of TRIP beyond 2024 to increase the number of agencies and localities capacity to build the infrastructure to offer zero fare service and conduct transit studies with the goal of creating more equitable outcomes for BIPOC in low income communities. By continuing to fund the TRIP incentive, the program can continue to assist transit authorities fund multiple zero-fare and connectivity projects. This will alleviate financial strain on low income communities, while increasing access to jobs, healthcare and other needed services. Overall, TRIP is a win-win situation that allows more federal funding, and creates more money less problems for the Commonwealth of Virginia. The 25% minimum TRIP funding for reduced and zero-cost fare programs should be required until racial and socioeconomic inequalities in transportation have been eradicated.

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