

COLTS plan shows need for state help

Mass transit is important to more than its direct users. An effective system is crucial to the economy, social mobility, the environment and to drivers who don't need to contend with even more traffic.

So, while the County of Lackawanna Transit System is reasonable in seeking its first fare increase since 1994, that and the problems faced by 13 other mass transit agencies statewide are a call for the state government to finally arrive at a permanent funding source for mass transit.

The COLTS plan is to roll in a 40 percent basic fare increase over the next two years — from \$1.25 to \$1.50 in July and then to \$1.75 in July 2013. The agency also would tweak some other aspects of its fare structure, including the introduction of new day passes for unlimited rides, at \$3.50 in July and \$4 a year later. Riders also would have a menu of discounted multiple-ride passes.

Pennsylvania subsidizes free rides for older residents, and that is one area where the state government should change the law in order to ensure the long-term health of mass transit. Transit agencies should be able to charge deeply discounted fares to older riders, say 25 or 50 cents, which still would be a tremendous bargain while helping transit agencies maintain good service. The state already allows such fares for train service; it should extend them to bus service.

Meanwhile, Gov. Tom Corbett has said he plans to address comprehensive transportation and transit funding this year. It has been in limbo ever since the federal government — three different times — shot down the state government's plan to generate revenue by establishing tolls on Interstate 80. The governor and lawmakers must ensure that their final program includes long-term, dedicated funding for transit.

Rural lawmakers often balk at transit funding because they view it as a giveaway to urban areas. But a 2007 study found that a third of all gasoline taxes in Pennsylvania are paid in just seven counties — Allegheny (the Pittsburgh area), Philadelphia and the five counties that surround it. Throw in the state's other urban areas and the figure easily would surpass 50 percent. Healthy mass transit is a vital component of the infrastructure in the counties that produce most of the revenue that also pays for maintenance and repairs of the state and interstate highways in rural areas.

COLTS' local fare proposal is a responsible approach, but it must be met by equal commitment at the state level.