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To: Chairman Benson and Members of the Assembly Transportation & Independent Authorities Committee

From: Chrissy Buteas, Chief Government Affairs Officer

Date: February 7, 2022

Re: NJBIA Testimony on Improving Equity and Access for New Jersey's workforce

I am Chrissy Buteas, Chief Government Affairs Officer at NJBIA, the country's largest statewide business association. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on how the State can improve equity and access for New Jersey's workforce by reducing regional, economic, and other disparities in the transportation network.

First, I want to acknowledge the work done and outreach made to NJBIA by our leaders in NJ Transit, Port Authority of NY & NJ, and the Department of Transportation throughout COVID-19 to get a pulse on the current and future transportation needs of the workforce.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 500,000 workers in New Jersey rely on public transportation as their primary method of commuting to work each year. Our state shares the responsibility of hosting two of the busiest public transit hubs in the country, with the New York-Newark-Jersey City metro area in the north, and the Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington metro area in the south.

As a suburban state with dispersed jobs, challenges exist with the use of mass transportation systems to work. While the story is yet to be told on what the future of commuting to work due to COVID-19, it will be important to examine future policies based on new, undefined work patterns. However, certain challenges do exist today in our mass transportation system. Currently, adequate mass transportation options do not exist equally throughout the state and vary by region as well. This is also the case for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) who rely on mass transit and paratransit services to find and maintain competitive work. Without it, maintaining a job is an unreachable dream. Our hope is that workers in this community will be addressed as various departments have created strategic and capital plans to address the commuting needs throughout the state.

Thus, ensuring mass transportation services are **affordable, reliable, and accessible options for our residents is critical to the future economic development of our state.**

Affordability:

Mass transportation options need to be affordable for employees to use the services. If the cost of bus and rail services is too expensive, it will be challenging for many who rely on these vital services to utilize them to get to work.

This is also very critical to individuals with I/DD who are, for the most part, very asset limited. To become or remain eligible for vital Medicaid-funded services, the majority of people with I/DD are forced to impoverish themselves and remain poor for a lifetime. Transportation services must be as affordable as possible for this population so that cost is not among the transportation obstacles facing people with I/DD.

In an effort to address affordability, last session A2456 was signed into law. It provides that users of Access Link paratransit service are automatically eligible for and enrolled in the motor bus and rail passenger discounted fare program. Due to COVID-19, we are trying to determine if this has been helpful to the community.

Accessibility:

Transportation options should be available in as many parts of the state as possible. This is especially true for “last mile” transportation. For example, there may be a train station in one section of a county, but what lacks are the bus routes or van transportation services to get from the train to the place of employment.

Accessibility challenges also exist in our tourism areas, especially in our shore community in southern New Jersey. During the summer months, thousands of tourists embark to the Jersey Shore, which also drives the need for a corresponding workforce to meet the demand. Unique challenges exist for this area which includes the following:

1. Extended hours of work
2. Traffic patterns that make it challenging to move the workforce
3. Lack of a reliable jitney service
4. Lack of real east-to-west routes outside of the causeways due to lack of housing for the workforce.

Furthermore, all transportation services offered must be accessible to all regardless of a person’s physical or cognitive challenges. Paratransit services (Access Link) are administered via NJ Transit: <https://www.njtransit.com/accessibility/access-link-ada-paratransit>. Access Link is severely limited, particularly in areas that are transportation deserts in our state. Where there are no bus lines running, there is no Access Link at all.

We also need to expand paratransit routes and hours of service, so transportation options better fit the needs of employees. They, along with individuals with I/DD who live in more rural parts of the state, have very limited transportation services. This is a roadblock to employment for those living in those geographic areas of New Jersey. More must be done to create adequate infrastructure and a realistic plan to expand services to those regions.

We urge NJ Transit to conduct an assessment in each county of the state to form a plan to address the chronic, critical lack of access to transportation for people with disabilities leading to an expansion of services.

Reliability:

While there are uncontrollable events that impact the reliability of transportation services, it

is important to make the system as dependable as possible. Ensuring mass transit systems arrive on time gives employees the confidence they will get to work on time.

Employers expect their workers, whether they have disabilities or not, to be both punctual and reliable. For individuals with I/DD who rely on paratransit services, those services need to pick up and drop off on time so workers can start their shift in a timely manner and fully complete their shift before departing.

People with I/DD often struggle with Access Link because they will call to schedule a pickup and Access Link doesn't show up on time, making them late for work or their doctor appointment. Similarly, at the end of the day, Access Link may arrive too early, forcing a person to leave their work shift before it's over. This can obviously upset the employer if it happens frequently and can jeopardize a person's employment. Additionally, if a paratransit van arrives to pick someone up and it is only then discovered that the chair lift on the van doesn't work and their wheelchair cannot be safely moved on board, then that person is now unable to travel to work. Vans and vehicles must be properly maintained to prevent this kind of scenario from occurring.

A few additional solutions can be contemplated as well:

- County-by-county assessment of mass transportation needs
- Revisit ride-share programs since new technologies exist
- Enhanced coordination between state and local governments to address existing transportation gaps
- "Pilot" shuttle services in hard-to-reach areas
- Consider unique models to deliver transportation services, such as the WAZE Car Service. For example, the Greater Mercer Transportation Management Association (GMTMA) participates in a reduced car ridership program. Per its website, employees are invited to join a custom group on Waze Carpool, signing up as either a driver or a rider. They're matched with fellow coworkers or workers in the area who have a similar route and schedule. Riders pitch in for the cost of the drive, which for riders in the group is set at \$1 courtesy of the GMTMA. Payment is handled through the app – no cash is exchanged. The subsidy is automatically applied for riders, and drivers will get reimbursed up to the IRS's allowable mileage rate for 2021 (56 cents per mile).
- Offer tax credit for businesses that pay commuting costs for work-related education/training
 - Similar to [Maryland's Commuter Tax Credit](#), which offers employers a credit against the personal income tax, corporate income tax, or the insurance premium tax, for commuter benefits offered to employees for travel to and from the workplace via public transportation
- Consider expanding the eligibility of reduced-priced student passes on NJ Transit. Students at many of the state's community colleges are eligible but only if they are full-time students. This can be expanded for part-time students or workers seeking training at our educational institutions.

We strongly believe that improved transit connections to employment centers are vital to continue economic growth and employment opportunities for New Jersey residents.