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Pittsburgh Food Policy Council

By: Leo Horrigan

If there was a time when the connection between transit and food security was not well understood, that time has apparently passed. At least, it has in Pittsburgh.

The Pittsburgh Food Policy Council is part of the Fair Fares Coalition, which successfully advocated for half-price fares for people who qualify for SNAP benefits (formerly known as food stamps). The program — known as Allegheny Go — is run by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS).

"[The coalition] had done enough prior work to connect the transit necessity to the food necessity," explained Sarah Buranskas, the Regional Food Economy Project Manager at the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council. "And then, to be able to say 'the Fair Fares campaign was not low fares for low income; it was low fares for people who already qualify for SNAP.'"

"So, it inherently had that link to food; by saying you have qualified through a different government program for some sort of assistance with purchasing food and then bringing that over into the transit world."

That detail improved efficiency in administering the program, since SNAP recipients had already been screened for eligibility based on low income. In addition, because the program is administered by DHS, the agency already had a list of county residents on SNAP, and a platform for advertising the program: the transit vehicles in the DHS-run system.

A portfolio of powerful partners

Some of the region's original work of linking food and transit was done by Just Harvest, a coalition member that helps people apply for SNAP.

Buranskas introduced the coalition's third key player:

"There's a really incredible local transit advocacy organization called Pittsburghers for Public Transit [PPT]. They were the lead. And then, Just Harvest is an anti-hunger nonprofit that we work really closely with. And they do a lot of really incredible work around factors contributing to hunger, transportation being one of them. So, three lead organizations, and a lot of other members as applicable and as folks were interested or wanted to join."

As Buranskas relates, PPT "did a lot of the heavy lifting around strategy. Who should be brought to this conversation?" PPT already had a lot of partners at the county level whom it could tap into.

The seed is planted with a plan

As the saying goes, from small things, big things one day come. This advocacy campaign was no different. From the food policy council's perspective, the seed for its involvement in the Fair Fares campaign was planted several years earlier during the lead-up to the Greater Pittsburgh Food Action Plan, which was released in February 2020.

At the time of its release, Sam Applefield, formerly a project manager for the food policy council, told FoodTank that "transportation, racial justice, and equitable distribution of land and resources were some of the key issues community members emphasized," during a community engagement session in 2019 that drew 140 participants.

In fact, transportation ranked second when participants were asked to name their priorities for improving their local food system.

"The process of writing the Greater Pittsburgh Food Action Plan was why we got involved in transit access for food access," Buranskas said. "It's listed as a strategy in the plan, partly because it engages us and partly because we already knew it was an issue."

But as Buranskas points out, access to reliable transit has larger implications beyond simply the convenience of it.

"It's not just a problem for getting to your job, or getting to health care services," she said. "It is also an issue for getting to any food access point, which is a basic human right. It's up there with being able to access your job and a doctor.

"There had also been a longstanding talking point in our county — it's probably a national talking point — around our public transit essentially being subsidized by the lowest income."

That's true because low-income riders are one of just two major demographic groups who use local public transit in Allegheny County, where Pittsburgh is situated. The other group is college students, whose transit use is subsidized through contracts between Pittsburgh universities and Pittsburgh Regional Transit (PRT).

"If you have the students getting a pretty good deal, then it's a lot of low-income riders who are funding this transit system, which doesn't make any sense," Buranskas said. "So, that was a talking point for a long time before even this campaign became a campaign, which was like, 'That's very backwards.' It's widely understood to be the case. We didn't have to do any convincing on that part, either."

Carrying the work forward

The campaign is not done yet, as the ultimate goal is to make transit free for SNAP recipients in Allegheny County.

In the meantime, there is a sustainability issue that needs to be worked out, which Buranskas spelled out:

"The weird position we're in right now: There's not really a good argument for DHS to continue funding this, except for them to do it out of the goodness of their own heart. It's not a mandate of the Department of Human Services to provide discounted fares to anyone," she said. "I actually don't know at this point where they're getting the

funding to do that, because they're subsidizing. PRT is not losing money from this. I think that's an interesting sort of 'to be determined.'"

In carrying this fight forward, though, the Pittsburgh FPC can claim both greater accountability and greater legitimacy for having contributed to this coalition effort.

"Because we said [transit] was important to food access in the Greater Pittsburgh Food Action Plan, that holds us accountable for acting on the items that we highlight," Buranskas said. "If we see all these things as vitally connected to the food system, we should also be working on them. And that was the outcome of all the engagement we did on the food action plan.

"Also, any time when we have really strong external coalition partners, it's helpful to us to then be able to go to a representative and say, 'We work with X, Y, and Z, and they have this number of members, and they have this legacy of work in the county.' And thirdly, it ended up being a win, so any time we have a win, that also makes us more legitimate as a voice for people in the county and a source of expertise."