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Saving transit in Pittsburgh

Local activists mobilize to stop fare hikes and service cuts



Ali Hebshi distributes information and postcards for bus riders to sign. If Governor Schweiker's proposed budget is passed, Port Authority will be forced to raise fares to \$2.00, despite April 2001's raise from \$1.25 to \$1.60.

Photo by Monica

BY ANDY MULKERIN

Although it felt more like late February than mid-May in downtown Pittsburgh, a group of citizens committed to keeping bus fares from rising and services from being cut hit the streets to raise awareness on May 14.

At around 4:30 pm, about 15 Save Our Transit activists gathered at the Wood Street subway station at the corner of Wood and Sixth Avenue to hold a press conference and ask bus riders to sign postcards to the governor asking that more money be given to the Port Authority of Allegheny County

so that the current bus and "T" services can maintained at a reasonable price.

In the wind and the cold activist Ali Hebshi explained the group's plight to a rush-hour crowd of about 50 waiting on buses outside the station. The coalition members then boarded the buses to garner grassroots support for their cause.

Save Our Transit was formed earlier this year when Governor Schweiker's proposed fiscal year 2002 budget was unveiled. The budget cuts state funding for the Port Authority by \$5.9 million. The federal budget provides little funding for PAT. If the governor's budget goes through as it is, PAT will cut service starting in the fall and will raise fares from \$1.60 to \$2.00.

The coalition, made up of community activists and public transit-dependent citizens, plans to make a trip to Harrisburg on

June 4 to drop off the postcards that they are collecting in person.

Save Our Transit already has gotten plenty of support in the local community – on April 30 Pittsburgh City Council approved councilman Jim Ferlo's proposal to declare that week "Save Our Public Transit Week." Coalition members are working on similar proposals for municipalities across Allegheny County.

F.Y.I.

For more information on Save Our Transit, call Steve Donahue at the Thomas Merton Center (412.361.3022) or Jonathan Robison (412.683.0237), or go to www.geocities.com/saveourtransit.

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+ 2. We really want you to help us!

3. Come to a huge, open-to-the-whole-world, bring-your-friends-and-family brainstorm meeting of the fledgling Pittsburgh chapter of the *Independent Media Center*.

4 PM ON JUNE 1, 2002

AT THE

SECOND PLATE

IN POSVAR HALL

AT PITT.

COMMENTARY

Being a "Mayday person" with a harmonica near the scene of the crime

BY DANIEL GORDON

If there's anything worse than getting arrested for something you didn't do, spending almost a day sleeping on concrete, and then having to thank the officer for his troubles in court, it's having to do it while trying to hold up your pants. It's a very delicate situation. Yes, I too have finally smelled the athlete's foot odor of our justice system.

Let me explain. I was walking home about two weeks ago, minding my own business, when three officers drove up on me as I pushed my bike down the alley that leads to my house. Busy loading my bike basket with paint cans that had been discarded during spring cleaning, I didn't notice anything until the officers hopped out and were practically breathing down my neck.

The one who seemed to be in charge – a snub-nosed man with a set of hair that looked like it had been run through a George Foreman grillin' machine – wanted to know who I was and what I was doing. When I confessed that I had no idea what

was going on they cuffed me and squeezed me into the back of the squad car. The other cop began rifling through my backpack on the hood of the car to taunt me; even quoting passages from my journal as he ran his stubby fingers across the page.

"It looks like there was just a robbery in the area," he said, after I asked why I was being held for the fifth time, "and you happen to be around."

I asked the cop if I had fit the description of the burglar. It turns out that no one had given

"You're not one of those Mayday people, are you?" he asked.

a description. However, the woman who owned the plumbing store in question had heard a whistling sound coming from the back of the store. And I happened to have – what's this? – a *harmonica* in my pocket.

"Looks like he coulda made a whistling sound with that," the other cop beamed, proud of his investigative work. I always

knew that police work took a bit of deduction, but these guys were trying to spin straw into gold with a rusty can opener. To make things worse, the third officer came back a few minutes later dangling an anti-war flyer he had nabbed from my journal.

"You're not one of those *Mayday* people, are you?" he asked with suspicion. He pointed to the patches on my sweatshirt. "I heard they're planning some Mayday protest on May 5."

"This just might have everything to do with the robbery," his wise sidekick added.

Before I could tell him that May Day was actually on the first, or that robberies and protests don't have anything to do with each other, the others returned to with an ultimatum. I could either go willingly to have a "chat" with their special investigator, or they would arrest me and make me see him anyway.

As soon as I mentioned the word "lawyer" I was cuffed and shipped into a spacious office where a man with a neck as big

as my waist told me he only "wanted to get to know me." Once again, my magic "lawyer" word brought back the same swarm of cops who scuttled me back into the car and to the County Jail.

"We'll call it trespassing," he said, when I asked what I was being charged with, "and take it from there."

So there I was, waiting thirteen hours to get fingerprinted for a crime I didn't commit, and trying desperately to peel the bologna out of the sandwiches. Twenty hours later, when I was finally bailed out, I was left wondering what crime I had committed besides seeming like a "Mayday person."

Luckily, I was given time served at my trial the next week, but the court still stole \$25 of my bail money for "filing fees." It made me realize just how easy it is to get picked off the streets in this country and held for ransom. It also reminded me to wear pants that fit without a belt. Let this be a lesson to those who think they can get away with holding political opinions around here – acting different is a crime.

Update: Waiting for the consequences of racist graffiti

BY EMMA REHM

Since the report of Nazi graffiti appearing on the Jewish University Center (JUC) in Oakland, the local activist community has talking about how to react. The general sentiment from the outset was accusatory, and most people felt like they were sure who was responsible. In fact, as it turns out, so do the police.

Pittsburgh Police Lieutenant Scott Suber says that there have been no other incidents related to the initial graffiti, a statement echoed by campus police at

Carnegie Mellon and the University of Pittsburgh. City police do know who is responsible for the vandalism, but are waiting to hear JUC board members' opinions on further action.

The detective on the case, Ronald Pasquarelli, explained that punishment will also depend in part on what the responsible individual intended at the time of the vandalism. A charge of graffiti is only a summary offense – the lowest form of crime in the state of Pennsylvania – and is punishable only by a fine. Graffiti on a

church, synagogue, school, or place of worship is considered institutional vandalism – which is how it was categorized in the incident report sent out by CMU police.

Pasquarelli says that he contacted the JUC on May 14, but would need to talk to them again. However, he said "In the next few days, some movement will be taken." In the meantime, there have been some community discussions and the activist kids are planning to distribute leaflets about hate crimes and tolerance.