



# Youth Advisory Council

· Getting youth on board with SEPTA ·

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## SEPTA Youth Advisory Council 2010 Midyear Progress Report

--Philip B. Dawson, Chair--

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The SEPTA Board's recognition of the Youth Advisory Council on Thursday, May 27, 2010 was an important testament to the success of this new organization and its place in SEPTA's larger mission to improve customer service. The YAC has accomplished much since its founding to merit such acknowledgment, and its work during the first half of 2010 has proven to be a particularly instrumental toward reaching its goals.

Since January 2010, the YAC has expanded its outreach to local youth, improved its communication, and completed its service evaluation work on a schedule that will allow it to deliver its first report to SEPTA management by the end of the summer. Through conversations with university administrations, the YAC has also secured SEPTA an active role in next year's new student orientations. Nevertheless, as the first permanently-meeting youth body of its kind in the country, the YAC must also address developing challenges as it continues to define its work and operations. Internally, it must improve member communication and overall participation to reach its full potential. Externally, it must focus on more effectively representing the suburban service area in order to fulfill its mission of representing all youth riders to SEPTA leadership.

The following pages detail the primary ongoing projects of the YAC, review their current progress, and offer proposals for their continuation. The purpose of this plan is to offer YAC members an overall context for the organization's activities, and to stimulate discussion about how its goals can be most effectively achieved.

### *Outreach and Events*



#### **On-campus Outreach**

The promising beginning of the YAC's On-campus Outreach in 2009 was cut short by the onset of the winter season. In an effort to compensate for this, the YAC kicked off a spring outreach blitz that brought it to a number of area colleges and universities. These events were planned to coincide with scheduled student fairs and welcoming days for incoming students, thereby guaranteeing the YAC a large student population to engage. Outreach events were carried out with great success at Temple University, the University of Pennsylvania, Arcadia University, and with the School District of Philadelphia.

While this active season provided a solid start to the YAC's outreach mission, there are still a large number of regional schools served by SEPTA which have not yet been visited by the YAC. Suburban schools in particular merit more attention in the YAC's outreach work, which has thus far been largely confined to colleges in Philadelphia County. The YAC's Outreach and Events Subcommittee should work to see that these institutions are incorporated in a well-planned outreach strategy during the coming months.

### **New Student Orientations**

The YAC determined very early on in its existence that incorporating a greater SEPTA presence into colleges' new student orientations would be an important step towards achieving its mission. The rationale for this decision was that students who receive little or no information about SEPTA upon entering college are more likely to continue steering clear of an unfamiliar system, more likely to fall prey to misconceptions about public transit, and more likely to influence their peers against using transit themselves. Students who are provided with the means to find their way around SEPTA upon arriving at their new school, on the contrary, are more likely to take advantage of our region's buses, trains, and trolleys as they continue their education.

The YAC tentatively plans on being present at freshman orientations at the University of Pennsylvania, Temple University, Drexel University, Arcadia University, Villanova University, and Penn State University's Abington Campus, although the final list of schools may be altered to account for volunteer availability and scheduling conflicts. Wherever possible, the Outreach and Communications Subcommittee should negotiate with university staff to arrange multi-faceted SEPTA involvement that includes a brief presentation to students in addition to typical outreach tables and flyers.

### **Promotions**

Since the YAC's first meetings, members have demonstrated great interest in collaborating with outside organizations to craft promotions that would encourage youth to ride SEPTA to existing events in the region. However, financial constraints have rendered these partnerships difficult to translate into reality. Frequently-suggested promotions of the "free ride day" sort are especially challenging to secure SEPTA approval for, as they predict lost fare revenue with uncertain promises of future increased youth ridership. Preliminary results of a Youth Rider Survey question on the issue have revealed that about 60% of respondents "would go out of [their] way to ride SEPTA" on a free ride day, indicating some potential that such a promotion would encourage youth to learn how to take SEPTA to their destinations. Additionally, SEPTA's willingness to offer \$1 ride days in early 2010 demonstrates that reduced fares for youth in conjunction with a special event are not out of the question. If the Outreach and Communications Subcommittee is still interested in undertaking this type of promotion, it may wish to direct a small work group to develop a specific proposal for it, and then negotiate the details with SEPTA.

### **High School Outreach**

The majority of YAC Outreach has thus far been focused on college students, due to both an open campus atmosphere that facilitates outreach by student groups and lower

rates of SEPTA usage among this demographic group. Nevertheless, the YAC does represent high school students as well, and actively seeks to advocate their needs to SEPTA. Past high school outreach events have included a presentation to Citywide Student Government at Philadelphia School District headquarters and a YAC table at the Opportunities Fair at the National Constitution Center. The YAC will also be present at a high school student Leadership Conference being held on June 19, 2010.

Future plans for high school outreach will also include a potential program that would bring public transportation education into the classroom (see *New Initiatives* below).

## *Service Evaluation*



### **The Philadelphia Youth Rider Survey**

Since the YAC's first press release announced the Philadelphia Youth Rider Survey on February 1, 2010, the project has proven to be a successful study of youth transportation usage and needs. A definitive copy of the final raw data should be available within the upcoming weeks, once the results of paper surveys have been computerized by Service Evaluation Subcommittee members. Nevertheless, preliminary results indicate that the survey is on track to have reached between 700 and 1,000 youth riders upon completion. The individuals surveyed—split between college and high school students, and covering most areas of the City—offer valuable information that will allow the YAC to determine which service improvements might benefit youth of distinct age groups with different levels of public transportation familiarity.

### **Report to SEPTA**

During the summer months, the Service Evaluation Subcommittee will embark on a crucial phase of its work: the analysis of survey results and the composition of a formal report that will be delivered to SEPTA leadership. This report will synthesize knowledge gleaned from the Youth Rider Survey, the Youth Rider Forum, and all other YAC activities in order to describe the status of youth and public transportation in the City, and suggest specific recommendations for serving this population better. The report should stand out as an important capstone work product which demonstrates the YAC's accomplishments and fulfillment of its mission so far. The response to the report will also serve as an important barometer of SEPTA's commitment to addressing the concerns of its large market of youth riders. The Youth Advisory Council urges SEPTA to devote appropriate consideration to the recommendations supported by hundreds of youth riders in this unprecedented effort.

### **Suburban Service Evaluation Project**

The Youth Rider Survey was originally envisioned as a project which would cover both the City of Philadelphia and its surrounding counties, thereby producing a comprehensive report on youth transportation needs in the entire SEPTA service area. Nevertheless, the time required to organize survey administration in schools and the finite resources of the YAC's volunteer members did not make such an ambitious endeavor practical. The solution—for the Service Evaluation Subcommittee to develop a new project to exclusively study suburban transportation needs for youth—may well prove to

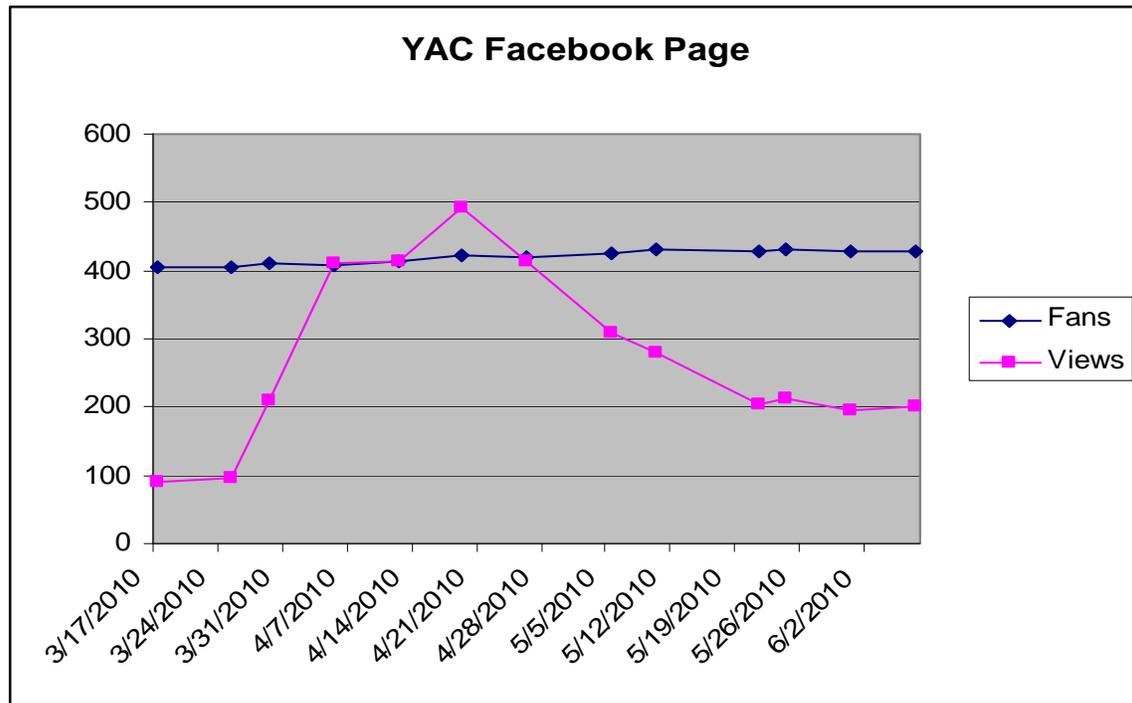
be a superior strategy to the original plan. By undertaking an independent effort, the YAC will be able to carefully plan and execute a project tailored to the distinct environment and service patterns of the suburban counties. Once the Service Evaluation Subcommittee has completed its report on the Philadelphia Youth Rider Survey, it should meet to determine the parameters and elements of this suburban study.

## Technology



### Facebook

The YAC's Facebook page continues to be a vital resource for informing youth riders of YAC events and general SEPTA news. Since the site's founding, it quickly



grew to a following of over 400 fans, although subsequent growth beyond that audience has been slow. Data on the public's interest in the page, as represented in the graph above, may offer other useful implications. The roughly month-long spike in page views, from a base of 200 per week to over 400 per week, coincides with the period of the YAC's spring outreach blitz, which was accompanied by frequent postings of announcements and photos on the Facebook page. This relationship is a reminder of the importance of regularly updating the page in order to stimulate youth interest in SEPTA. When Facebook users see the YAC in their News Feed, they are much more likely to click on its link and read about SEPTA happenings. Increasing the number of fans who are linked to the page is slightly more challenging, but ensuring that the link is prominently advertised on flyers (and that those flyers are present at all outreach events) is a good strategy for continuing to attract attention. Finally, the recent decision to change the Facebook page address to a simple and recognizable URL promises to make this online resource more accessible to youth.

## **YAC Webpage**

Upon the release of the last progress report in January, the YAC had not yet expanded its official webpage beyond the original application information placed there by SEPTA. Within a couple of months, however, content was expanded to include sections describing the YAC's mission and work plan, member biographies, and current events and initiatives. While the Facebook page hosts most of the YAC's dynamic content and news, the official webpage provides the organization with an important presence on SEPTA's website where plenary meeting times and documents like the Youth Rider Survey can be conveniently posted for public access. In order to continue making YAC information available to the youth it represents, a "Documents and Reports" section might be added to the webpage, which could include downloadable meeting minutes, biannual progress reports, and, upon its completion, the report from the Youth Rider Survey.

## *New Initiatives*



### **Transit Education Work Group**

The plan for a partnership between SEPTA, the YAC, and area high schools that was presented at the YAC's May plenary meeting quickly earned the support of both YAC and CAC members. As envisioned, this project would seek to develop a public transportation curriculum that could be delivered to students as part of an interactive program by a guest presenter. In order to advance this idea, YAC members will be asked to volunteer to join a Transit Education Work Group, which will be charged with planning this program and undertaking the negotiations with SEPTA and specific school districts that would make it a reality.

### **Advisory Resolutions**

As an advisory council with a distinct mission and constituent group from that of the Citizens Advisory Committee, the YAC has appropriately developed its work plan along independent lines. Nevertheless, as the YAC is an advisory board to SEPTA, it should consistently seek to ensure that its members are well-informed on local public transportation issues and that they offer a means of communicating timely youth concerns to SEPTA leadership. The report that will be developed from the Philadelphia Youth Rider Survey will partially fulfill this goal, but it will focus largely on persistent, long-term issues. Therefore, there remains a need for the YAC to provide SEPTA with feedback on issues affecting youth on a short-term basis. To address this, the YAC should consider soliciting topics from youth riders that they would like to see studied or addressed at meetings. For instance, the YAC could request tips from youth in person at outreach events, or online via the webpage and Facebook page. These topics could then be evaluated, discussed at meetings, and, when appropriate, put up for vote in the form of a resolution that could be sent to SEPTA to advocate for a specific action. Concurrently, the YAC should continue the practice of periodically inviting guest speakers to its meetings to inform it on notable transportation issues.

## *Internal*



Effective leadership and internal organization are the foundation of the YAC's work and the means by which it achieves its larger goals. For that reason, it is important that the YAC evaluate the success of its management model over the past nine months and identify strategies for improvement. An Internal Satisfaction Survey, distributed at the May plenary meeting, serves as a useful basis for reviewing member feedback in several key areas.

### **Internal Satisfaction Survey**

When asked to evaluate their level of participation, almost half of YAC members feel they are on par with their peers' level of involvement, but a significant number (one-third) feel they should be doing more work. Members' feedback on the functioning of the subcommittee system provides more detail on the nature of this issue. Most individuals are content with their subcommittee assignment and feel that their subcommittee functions at least moderately well on the whole. However, two-thirds of members report that their subcommittee maintains "low" or "very low" levels of communication between plenary meetings, and 42% do not feel that their group effectively discusses, delegates, and accomplishes its assignments on a monthly basis. Additional comments reveal that this is attributed to a number of problems, including a poor response of some members to the subcommittee chair's direction, a small core of members completing most projects, and a lack of clear tasks at the individual level.

Member feedback indicates high satisfaction with the Chair's leadership of the Council, with over 90% concurrence that overall leadership, achievement of goals, and communication are "good" or "excellent" on a monthly basis. The YAC exhibits similar approval of SEPTA's support for its work, with 50% of members indicating a "good" level of support, and 33% rating support "excellent." Assessment of SEPTA's willingness to consider YAC proposals is less uniform, with a quarter of members each rating it "good" or excellent," a third of members rating it "average," and 17% rating it "poor." Additional commentary suggest that this range of responses may derive from a perception of strong SEPTA support for outreach activities, but less support for more substantive system reforms. Finally, member feedback on the overall mission and progress of the Youth Advisory Council is very encouraging, with all members "pleased" or "very pleased" with the direction of its work, and 92% agreement that the YAC is meeting its goals and making a difference among youth.

### **Strategies for Improvement**

This exercise in self-assessment affirms many of the positive achievements of the YAC, including high member satisfaction with its mission and progress, strong leadership, and good rapport with SEPTA. Nevertheless, it also reveals a subcommittee system that allows for unequal distribution of work, poor communication between meetings, and insufficient collaboration. As the YAC prepares to enter its second year and expand its outreach to suburban counties, developing more effective management policies is essential to maximizing its potential. Strategies to improve in these areas will focus on increasing communication and member accountability.

Closing the communications gap between subcommittee or work group chairs and their members is a task that will require action by both parties. Subcommittee chairs have the responsibility of ensuring that goals in their area of focus are accomplished on a monthly basis. In order to ensure that subcommittee members are clear on what needs to be done and what their personal responsibilities are, chairs should translate projects into a series of tasks that can be assigned to individuals. One way of doing this is by composing a simple sheet that includes a column of subcommittee member names and a corresponding column for tasks. Each month, the subcommittee chair can fill in the chart, ensure that each member understands their task, and then provide a copy of the chart to the YAC Chair and Vice Chair. Under this system, the individual member will always be aware of their assignment, and YAC leadership will be able to ensure that each member is doing their share of the organization's work.

Greater attention should also be paid to plenary meeting attendance and participation in outreach events. While the majority of the YAC maintained good rates of attendance throughout the year, members only provided an explanation or requested an excuse for 30% of all absences. As SEPTA and the CAC review official attendance sheets to determine the eligibility of members to remain on the YAC, it is in members' interest to account for their absences by providing a written note or email to the Chair whenever possible. Finally, the YAC should do more to ensure that all members are making their best effort to participate in the organization's activities. In order to achieve this, the Outreach and Communications Subcommittee Chair can maintain a record of attendance at each outreach event. The YAC could also consider recognizing the member with the highest participation with an annual award.

These management reforms in subcommittee work, meeting attendance, and outreach participation should address member concerns of unclear responsibilities and unequal work distribution. They are designed to create an open and accountable system in which individuals can be recognized for their contributions and in which SEPTA and YAC leadership can more closely monitor participation.

## *Appendix*



### **SEPTA YAC Internal Satisfaction Survey Results**

#### *Personal Contribution*

How do you feel your participation level compares with YAC members as a whole?

0% Much less      25% Less      **41.7% Same**      25% Higher      0% Much higher  
8.3% No response

Are you happy with your level of participation in the YAC so far?

**75% Yes**      25% No

If not, please say why:

0% I feel like I'm doing more work than I should be

33.3% I feel like I should be doing more work

Other: *"I feel like that it's fun. I like working hard but we need more people to work as hard."*

*"I will continue to try and do better!"*

*“Busy with other things, but not sure how exactly I can [become] involved with [the] YAC more.”*

### *Subcommittee*

How well do you feel your subcommittee functions as a whole?

0% Very poorly 0% Poorly **66.7% Average** 25% Well 8.3% Very well

Are you content with your subcommittee assignment?

**66.7% Yes** 16.7% No 16.7% Neither

What level of communication does your subcommittee maintain between monthly YAC meetings?

16.7% Very low **50% Low** 16.7% Average 8.3% High 8.3% Very high

Do you feel your subcommittee effectively discusses, delegates, and accomplishes its assignments on a monthly basis?

**58.3% Yes** 41.7% No

If not, please say why:

0% Insufficient leadership from subcommittee chair

25% Insufficient member response to subcommittee chair’s direction

8.3% Tasks unclear, too complicated

Other: *“A few members do most of the work. Our subcommittee doesn’t meet very often, and I’m not sure how to get more involved.”*

*“No clear tasks for individual members.”*

*“Chair does everything on her own and does not include anyone else until actual event.”*

*“I think we should re-evaluate committee functions.”*

*“We simply don’t meet on a monthly basis. Also, I wouldn’t be needed.”*

### *Leadership*

How would you rate the Chair’s overall leadership of the organization?

0% Very poor 0% Poor 8.3% Average 33.3% Good **58.3% Excellent**

How would you rate the Chair’s establishment of goals for the YAC and oversight of achieving those goals?

0% Very poor 0% Poor 0% Average 41.7% Good **58.3% Excellent**

How would you rate the effectiveness of the Chair’s communication with members between monthly meetings?

0% Very poor 0% Poor 8.3% Average **50% Good** 41.7% Excellent

### *SEPTA*

How would you rate SEPTA’s support of the YAC’s work so far?

0% Very poor 0% Poor 16.7% Average **50% Good** 33.3% Excellent

How would you rate SEPTA’s willingness to consider YAC proposals?

0% Very poor 16.7% Poor **33.3% Average** 25% Good 25% Excellent

Additional comments:

*“SEPTA is very receptive to outreach, not so much to proposals that would require them to make changes.”*

*Mission*

How pleased are you with the direction the YAC's work has taken since its founding?

0% Very displeased    0% Displeased    **75%Pleased**    25% Very pleased

Do you believe the YAC is meeting its goals and making a difference among local youth?

**91.7% Yes**    0% No    8.3% Unsure

If no, please say why:

*"I don't know how big of a difference we're making; most people don't know who we are and we haven't changed or inspired any changes within SEPTA. Also, we should reach out to private schools and suburban schools."*

How could the YAC serve youth better?

*"Need to keep researching and finding their point of interest."*

*"Keep doing a good job."*

*"Separate complaint system or ways to get their ideas to SEPTA."*

*"More outreach to various areas and more in-depth events such as the forum we held."*

*"Mobilize youth on a political front to support transit; considering recent budgetary issues."*

What is your favorite part of being on the YAC so far?

*"The people I work with."*

*"Interaction with SEPTA."*

*"Learning more about SEPTA."*

*"Very professional."*

*"Experience with a professional organization."*

*"Meeting/networking with transit-interested youth."*

*"I like the outreach events, reaching out with customers, and [our] direction."*

What about your least favorite?

*"Better scheduling [of meetings]."*

*"Feeling like I'm not changing much."*

*"Immature YAC members."*

*"Work moves slowly; redefine or better determine scope. Some members do not seem to understand, in a pragmatic sense, what we can accomplish."*