

SENATE BUDGET AND APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO

SENATE, No. 2517

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: AUGUST 24, 2020

The Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee reports favorably Senate Bill No. 2517.

This bill reforms the State's system of providing paratransit services.

The bill requires the New Jersey Transit Corporation (NJ Transit) to better integrate its paratransit services with other paratransit services. Under the bill, this is achieved by requiring NJ Transit to ensure that all paratransit service that NJ Transit directly manages, administers, or supports financially implements an open software platform that will be compatible with the software used by other paratransit providers. The bill requires NJ Transit to identify regular and recurring trips and develop a system where other paratransit providers can complete those trips, on behalf of NJ Transit, if the provider can meet applicable federal standards, provide the trip at a lower cost, and protect customer safety.

The bill also requires NJ Transit to develop an Access Link program structure that allows NJ Transit to realize cost savings when reducing Access Link trip volumes, and share those savings with paratransit providers that meet minimum federal standards and successfully compete for regular and routine trips. The bill also encourages NJ Transit to move trips requested under the Access Link program to other State based programs entirely, especially if those trip requests are not eligible under the Access Link program.

The bill requires the establishment of a best practices pilot program for paratransit providers. The pilot program is to be run by the Division of Developmental Disabilities (division) in consultation with NJ Transit and a qualified community organization to be selected by the division. Under the first phase of the pilot program, the qualified community organization and NJ Transit will develop a paratransit best practices training module with final approval from the division. Under the second phase of the pilot program, the division is to select five paratransit providers, upon application, to receive training in paratransit best practices. The qualified community organization will then provide the training to each of the five paratransit providers under a training contract with the division. The training will include modern trip making software, trip confirmation and scheduling, a mobile phone application for customers, dashboard camera safety technology, and agency-wide and individual employee training and guidance.

Depending upon the success of phase two of the pilot training program, the first part of phase three will involve: a revision of the training module into a training package that other paratransit providers can adopt without direct training from the qualified community organization; or a determination by NJ Transit, the division, and the qualified community organization of some other method of integrating paratransit service so that paratransit providers meeting certain standards can compete for regular and routine paratransit trips. The second part of phase three involves the establishment of regional paratransit coordinating councils.

The bill creates new regional paratransit coordinating councils (coordinating councils). The coordinating councils are to be located within the Department of Human Services. There are to be six coordinating councils divided geographically by county. Membership on the coordinating councils include the division, NJ Transit, NJ Transit Access Link contractors from each service region, county government officials, county paratransit system operators, certain community organizations, and up to three additional paratransit providers within the region as chosen by the division. The coordinating councils are to meet at least quarterly and share best practices. The coordinating councils are also required to establish a system to exchange information between paratransit providers and eventually develop open platform standards and share budget information. The coordinating councils will replace the county based councils used to develop county plans under the Senior Citizen and Disabled Resident Transportation Assistance Program, but the councils may establish county level subcommittees for this purpose. The county plans are required to account for the efforts of this bill to integrate Statewide paratransit service under a unified platform, improve Statewide coordination across geography and across agency, and create a more cohesive user experience. The coordinating councils are also to be utilized by NJ Transit to develop its revised Access Link program so that the paratransit providers on the council can be used as a resource when allowing paratransit providers to compete for regular and routine Access Link trips. Finally the coordinating councils are to serve as a resource and develop materials to assist other paratransit providers in achieving the integration objectives in the first part of phase three of the pilot program, either through the revised training module or the alternate solution developed.

The bill requires the division, in consultation with NJ Transit, to issue a report to the Governor and the Legislature at the end of the pilot program. The report is to include information on the pilot program and a recommendation on whether or not to continue the pilot program, as well as an analysis of the decisions made about how to proceed with the Statewide integration required in the first part of the third phase of the pilot program. The division and NJ Transit are also

required to survey consumers of paratransit services within the pilot program and include feedback from those consumers in the report.”

The bill provides a supplemental appropriation of federal funds to NJ Transit for the cost of developing the training module and related software development, and a general fund appropriation to the division for the cost of phase two of the pilot program.

FISCAL IMPACT:

The Office of Legislative Services finds that the New Jersey Transit Corporation (NJ Transit) will realize increased costs in order to establish the paratransit best practices pilot program, restructure the Access Link program, and to staff and oversee the coordinating councils. These costs will restructure the provision of paratransit services in the State in a way that will generate savings for NJ Transit by reducing the cost of the Access Link program and for the Department of Human Services (DHS) by reducing the cost of paratransit trips funded by DHS and provided by community organizations. The magnitude of such costs and savings will depend upon the success of the pilot program. The paratransit best practices training program is structured in phases, which will only proceed if prior phases are successful. This mechanism will allow some costs of the pilot program to be averted if they are not successful in driving cost savings as intended.