

Transportation Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: SB-1243

AN ACT CONCERNING FARE-FREE BUS PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION
SERVICES FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS, VETERANS AND LOW-INCOME

Title: PASSENGERS.

Vote Date: 3/19/2025

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 2/10/2025

File No.:

Disclaimer: *The following JOINT FAVORABLE Report is prepared for the benefit of the members of the General Assembly, solely for purposes of information, summarization and explanation and does not represent the intent of the General Assembly or either chamber thereof for any purpose.*

SPONSORS OF BILL:

Transportation Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

This bill would exempt veterans, high school students, and low-income riders from paying fares for state-owned or controlled public buses and would have them present a driver's license or ID card that indicates their veteran status. It also requires the CTDOT to establish a program for public school students in grades 9-12 to ride state-owned or controlled public buses without cost. A successful pilot program for fare free busing ran in Hartford and has since been advocated for its continuance. Free busing was provided by the state during the COVID-19 pandemic and it was found to be a valuable resource for those that needed it.

SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE:

The substitute language replaces most of the bill. It requires the DOT to create a program that provides fare-free public busing services for veterans and public-school students in grades 9-12. It also removes low-income individuals from the original iteration as they make up such a large percentage of ridership that exempting them from bus fares would be unsustainable.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Garret Eucalitto, Commissioner, Connecticut Department of Transportation.

Commissioner Eucalitto opposes the bill because they state funding to cover the loss in revenue in bus fares across the state, is not covered in the Governor's proposed budget, and would have large operational and financial impacts on bus service across the state.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

James Amaro, Chairman, Manchester Veterans Advisory Committee

Chairman Amaro supports the bill because they say many veterans in their community struggle with access to reliable transportation. They also state that such a program would help combat veteran homelessness and improve Veterans lives by helping them get to job interviews and job training sessions.

Sunrise New Haven

Sunrise New Haven supports the bill, stating it will improve school attendance in urban areas, and increase participation in after-school programs, internships, and community events. They also state it will help reduce carbon emissions, by having more persons opt for public transit.

Anastasia Brewczynski

Ms. Brewczynski supports the bill, stating it will improve school attendance in urban areas, and increase participation in after-school programs, internships, and community events. They feel this legislation is urgent as recent fare increase proposals in the state would have a particularly harmful impact on many low-income riders.

Thomas Broderick

Mr. Broderick supports the bill, because as an educator, they see free public transit as critical to encourage not only school attendance, but in allowing more students to participate in extracurricular activities and internships, especially in urban areas.

Adam Callaghan

Mr. Callaghan supports the bill because they say public transit reduces congestion, increases safety, and lessens environmental impact. They say free fares for everyone should be a long-term goal.

Ruth Canovi, Director, Connecticut American Lung Association

Director Canovi supports the bill, citing the positive environmental impacts and in particular, air quality impacts, increased use of public transportation brings.

Arleen Cohen, Executive Director, Center for Latino Progress, CPRF

Director Cohen supports the bill because they say it will enhance the lives of low-income individuals, and in particular high school students, leading to increased school attendance and participation in extracurricular activities.

Sarah Roy

Ms. Roy supports the bill, citing high costs of maintaining a car in the state, and the positive impacts the bill would have on urban high school students.

Melinda Tuhus, Connecticut Climate Crisis Mobilization

Ms. Tuhus supports the bill citing positive impacts it would have on students improving school attendance and participation of after school programs. They also would like to see early college students and high school students taking college classes to be permitted to take free public transit to Gateway and SCSU via the U-Pass program, which at present specifically bars early college students.

Jay Stange, Organizer, Connecticut Tickets to Opportunity

Mr. Stange supports the bill citing the positive impacts it will have on students in urban communities in regard to school attendance and extracurricular participation. They note the high cost of owning and operating a car annually in Connecticut. They also note sharp declines in bus ridership occurred in the state's urban centers recently after free fares, made possible by federal grants, ended in 2023. They also state they would like to see Hartford's "Connecticut Tickets to Opportunity Bus Pass Pilot" program, made possible by an ARAP grant, a program that helped some students take the bus at no cost, expanded statewide. They state they wish for the DOT to permit all CT public high school students to ride CT Transit buses free for one year between August of 2025 and 2026.

Irene Skrybailo

Ms. Skrybailo supports the bill, because they state cars are expensive, and difficult to keep in urban environments. They also cite the positive environmental impacts that occur because of increased use of public transit.

Chris Schweitzer, Director, New Haven Climate Movement

Director Schweitzer supports the bill, citing its positive impacts in pollution reduction, which they say would improve the quality of life for all CT residents. They also cite the annual high cost of owning a personal car, and the positive impact free fares would have on high school curricular and extracurricular attendance.

Kate Rozen, Vice Chair, Connecticut Public Transportation Council

Ms. Rozen supports the bill in their personal capacity because they feel it will positively impact attendance for high school students, allow them to participate in extracurricular activities, and help veterans facing financial hardship, to access medical care more easily, job training and community services. They also cite the lessening of financial burden this will particularly have on low-income passengers. They advise the committee to revise the bill to clarify if the bill will be funded by new appropriations to the DOT or reallocated funds. They further ask the committee to examine and block the proposal in the Governor's budget to increase rail and bus network fares, that they say will result in reduced ridership and revenue. They also ask the committee to ensure dedicated and sustainable funding for this proposal,

clarify the roles of school districts in this proposal (including whether they are expended to monetarily contribute) and leverage federal and local resources, in coordination with the FTA to enhance funding and service integration.

Abigail Roth

Ms. Roth supports the bill because they say it empowers people who do not, or cannot, drive a car. They specifically highlight the ability for high school students to attend school and extracurricular activities more easily, and for all persons to get to a workplace.

Alex Rodriguez, Environmental Justice Specialist, Save the Sound

Mr. Rodriguez supports the bill, citing the positive environmental impacts they say will occur from increased use of public transit, especially in reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. They also state that the state will generate four dollars in economic value, for every dollar invested in public transportation, and the state would create and support 36,000 jobs for every billion dollars invested in public transportation.

Hector Reyes

Mr. Reyes supports the concept of offering free fares in general, however commented on what they feel is a lack of Latino representation among bus drivers in the Hartford area, which they state are mostly African American and Caucasian persons. They want the state to hire more Latino bus drivers.

Jack Potter

Mr. Potter supports the bill, saying it is critical for urban high school students to properly pursue education and future opportunities.

Honorah O'Neill

Ms. O'Neill supports the bill because they state it will allow persons who presently struggle to get around, to do so. They cite the positive impact in reducing congestion recent legislation in New York City has had in improving the reliability of public transit.

Ian Nixon

Mr. Nixon supports the bill, citing positive experiences with the U-Pass program as a student, and their strong belief that students, low-income persons, and veterans all deserve free public transportation.

Renato Muguera, Legislative Aide, City of Hartford

Mr. Muguera supports the bill because they say students deserve an even playing field with adults, for educational and career pursuits, and providing free public transportation would be a huge part of that.

Casey Moran

Mr. Moran supports the bill because they state investing in our students is an investment into the future of the state, will lessen student absenteeism and tardiness.

Joshua Michtom, Councilman, Hartford City Council

Councilman Michtom supports the bill stating it will have a transformative impact on Hartford's teenagers. They state providing free transit access to students helps them not only attend school, but get involved in extracurricular activities, which they say is one of the best things we can do to help our youth avoid crime. They also feel a long-term effect will be a higher likelihood of students being accepted into, and attending, college.

David Michel, Former State Representative, Connecticut General Assembly

Former representative Michel supports the bill, citing the high costs of maintaining a car in the state, and highlighting the positive effect this legislation would have on high school students to attend school and extracurricular activities.

Jason Kohl, Member, Transit Riders Union of Connecticut

Mr. Kohl supports the bill because it will support our students, which they state are key in the state having a thriving economy in the future and serve as a reminder to them that our institutions can be trusted.

Jim King

Mr. King supports the bill, offering their testimony on behalf of a diverse coalition representing the Office of Workforce Strategy sub-committees. They say the bill would help lower the states' unemployment gap and empower all CT residents to succeed in school and in the workforce. They note one of the major reasons 48% of persons with disabilities, and veterans, are lacking gainful employment, is access to transportation which this bill addresses.

Nick Kantor, Director, DesegregateCT

Director Kantor supports the bill, noting the high annual costs of owning a car, the benefits the legislation would offer to high school students to attend school and extracurricular activities, and the environmental benefits in increased public transportation, chiefly reduced greenhouse gas emissions.

Katherine Jacobs

Ms. Jacobs supports the bill, highlighting the high annual cost of owning a car in CT, and stating the benefits it would provide to urban high school students to engage in both school and extracurricular activities.

Princesse Ashley Hyppolite, Friday for Future Stamford

Ms. Hyppolite supports the bill, because they feel it removes transportation barriers facing students, and promotes greener commuting.

Samuel Haller

Mr. Haller supports the bill, and hoping not to repeat prior testimony, would just like to add that they feel public transportation helps alleviate the perception of loneliness and alienation many people deal with in modern American life.

Violette Haldane, Executive Director, Advocacy to Legacy

Director Haldane supports the bill, highlighting the massive benefits this program would have for students not only to attend school, but also to engage in their communities and get involved in extracurricular activities.

Alison Correia

Ms. Correia supports the bill, believing every student should have a free ride to school, and supports low-income persons and veterans as well, stating it will provide transportation to those who might otherwise have no alternative. Additionally, they state it will lead to a reduction in carbon emissions.

Brian DaConto

Mr. DaConto supports the bill, highlighting the importance of allowing veterans to access reliable transportation needed for appointments and jobs. They feel the bill shows respect and gratitude for those who serve our country.

Aziz Dehkan, Executive Director, Connecticut Roundtable on Climate and Jobs

Director Dehkan supports the bill stating that it is important for students not only to attend school, but to engage in extracurricular activities as well.

Susan Eastwood, Chapter Chair, Sierra Club Connecticut and Chair, Ashford Clean Energy Task Force

Ms. Eastwood supports the bill stating that the bill if passes would present a major step towards equality in opportunity for young and lower income passengers.

Charles Glass, Physician and Juliette Glass

Mr. and Mrs. Glass support the bill, citing the high cost of keeping a car in the state, and the benefits it would provide to urban high school students in terms of accessible transit to both school and extracurricular activities.

Marc Gonzalez, Program Coordinator, Conservation Law Foundation

Mr. Gonzalez supports the bill, citing the lack of economic, educational, commercial, and cultural opportunities persons who do not drive in the state lose out on. They also highlight

the benefits it would have for students, not only on school attendance but also on students' ability to engage in extracurricular activities.

Aaron Goode, Greater New Haven Green Fund

Mr. Goode appreciates the bill for raising awareness for free-fare transit, as they see it as a social justice and transportation equity issue. They do state that they feel, in order for the bill to be sustainable, without adversely impacting service, they suggest a statutory change earmarking 5% of all traffic safety camera tickets in Connecticut to full subsidize ridership for youth, seniors and low-income users. They also state CT Transit should negotiate or re-negotiate user agreements with employers like Amazon, for services such as the 215x, which operate largely as publicly subsidized employee shuttles, and re-directing the proceeds to make those routes fare-free for low-income users and exchanging equity across that particular transit district.

Robert Goodrich, Executive Director, Radical Advocates for Cross-Cultural Education

Mr. Goodrich supports the bill, citing the high costs of maintaining a car in Connecticut, and the need to reduce vehicle emissions in underserved and underrepresented communities. They also cite the benefits urban high school students would enjoy, improving not only school attendance, but also extracurricular participation in school activities.

Luis Lage

Mr. Lage supports the bill, as a student, because they note the benefits public bus transit has provided to allow them to be mobile, access local businesses, work, and attend school. They hope the bill would provide a pathway to a free-fare transit system.

Julianna Larue, Organizer, Sierra Club

Ms. Larue supports the bill citing the positive impact increased public transit would have on the climate crisis, including reduced pollution. They also note that public transit is a lifeline for those in underserved communities, and that veterans and high school students stand to benefit greatly from the proposal, to help them access education, employment, medical facilities and more.

Phoebe Law

Ms. Law supports the bill, because they say public transit helps make people healthier, helps them become more connected, helps the environment, and will help students by allowing them to focus more on their studies instead of trying to find transportation.

Thomas Regan-Lefebvre, Wethersfield Resident

Mr. Regan-Lefebvre supports the bill, because they state it helps address the rising cost of living for some of our most vulnerable residents, and says the bill also addresses these residents, who do not own their own motor vehicles, and therefore, disproportionality contribute to road improvements in the form of state taxes.

K. Robert Lewis, Legislative Committee Chairman, The American Legion

Mr. Lewis supports the bill because they say having safe, secure, and dependable free public transit is important for students, veterans and low-income persons.

Melinda Longtin, Social Welfare Action Alliance

Ms. Longtin supports the bill, because they believe every person should have the ability to achieve a high quality of life and feels public transportation access eliminates an immense barrier to achieving that goal. As a social worker, Longtin states that in the underserved communities this bill would have the largest effect on, reliable access transportation is one of the single greatest obstacles individuals face when trying to improve their lives.

William Lussier

Mr. Lussier supports the bill.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

Leon Feret

Mr. Feret opposes the bill, feeling the legislation to be an unnecessary use of taxpayer funds.

Samuel Gold, Executive Director, ACIP

Mr. Gold on behalf of the Chief Elected/Executive Officials of Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments (RiverCOG), opposes the bill, stating that if passed, without new state funding to cover the lost fares, it will result in transit service cuts. They also feel that free fares should be allocated on a means basis, citing the example that they believe most veterans are not in financial need and can afford the full bus fare and that a free fare should only be offered to veterans who are financially struggling.

Mario Marrero, Executive Director, Greater New Haven Transit District

Mr. Marrero opposes the bill because of the increased costs agencies will incur if the bill is approved, and they feel the funds would be better invested by improving existing service frequency and expansion of service coverage areas.

Pegg Ridolfo

Ms. Ridolfo opposes the bill.

Mary Tomolonius, Executive Director, CACT

Ms. Tomolonius opposes the bill because of the significant impact it will have on revenue for the transit agencies across the state that presently provide service. They feel the loss in revenue would stagnate the growth of many agencies who have recently expanded service. They urge the committee to instead, invest in the future of bus transportation in the state.

Robert Yastremski, Chief Executive Officer, Housatonic Area Regional Transit

Mr. Yastremski opposes the bill because they feel it will impact their funding, resulting in service delays and disruption due to limited resources. They also feel the complexity of implementing a free pass system will cause delays, and that many riders without the proper identification will nonetheless try to board, causing increased frustration for the drivers, delays in service, and increased instances of fare evasion from persons who do not qualify for free fares.

Joseph Comerford, Executive Director, Estuary Transit District

Mr. Comerford does not explicitly express support or opposition to the legislation, however notes that if passed, 50% of their ridership is comprised of low-income persons, and since the bill has no new funding provision attached, it means the district will be dealing with increased ridership with a sharp reduction in funding from lack of fares, leading to significant operational impacts. They district does support and appreciate the intention of the bill to improve mobility and create access to employment opportunities for CT residents however they feel to best achieve this goal is to invest in improvements to service span, service frequency and service areas.

Francis Pickering, Executive Director, Western Connecticut Council of Governments

Director Pickering has neutral comments on the bill. They state they have not seen data that fare reduction or elimination is a top priority for bus riders, however more service, extending service areas, increased number of buses and hours are. They state those priorities will be hard to achieve with the expected revenue loss if the bill goes into effect. Furthermore, with the uncertain availability of federal funding for the states transit programs after 2026, they state it may be wise to refrain from reducing state revenues until there is more clarity regarding the future of federal funding.

Steven DeMichele, CEO/General Manager, Greater Bridgeport Transit

Mr. DeMichele is neutral on the proposal, stating that reducing fare revenue collected, as this bill would do, without a full funding offset from the state, will result in system reductions, which is likely to reduce access to transit services in Connecticut. They say to increase ridership, instead, we need to invest in improvements to frequency, service span and geographic coverage of our existing transit services. They further state bus passes are available to riders at present through a number of social service agencies at reduced or no cost. They argue that will the bills intentions are to increase access, as written, due to the predictable loss in funding, it will actually harm those who rely on the states' public transit systems the most.

Reported by: Alex Sferrazza & Patrick Riley

Date: 3/24/2025