



NLNA General Meeting Minutes Meeting of March 20, 2024

NLNA Community Center: 6:00 PM - 7:15 PM

Speakers: Senator Nikil Saval, Councilmember Mark Squilla

Agenda

- 1. Senator Nikil Saval**
- 2. Intercity Bus Operations Community Discussion with Councilmember Mark Squilla**

Meeting Minutes

Senator Nikil Saval Intro

Senator Nikil Saval provided an introduction:

- First Senatorial District (rep since 2021) – Reviewed the boundaries of the district for background
- Key focus: Affordable housing work, creating and adopting Whole Homes Repair Program (March 2022)
 - Funds basic repairs across commonwealth of PA (energy efficiency, modifications for individuals with disability, updating electric)
 - Includes fund coordination at the county level and funds job training in the energy efficiency and construction-related industry (recently determined that this would also be funded at the national level)
 - Nikil has local offices at 6th and Washington and on Germantown Ave
 - He works closely with the BID and neighborhood associations

Senator Saval then provided an overview of the Budget:

- The Governor outlined his ambitious budget in February
- Major increase in education funding
 - following commonwealth court ruling that Pennsylvania's school funding system is unconstitutional and must be reformed,
- \$283 million in transit funding proposed in Shapiro's budget
 - An additional 1.75% of state sales tax to PA Transportation Trust Fund (will assist in shortfall to SEPTA funding)

- State also working with the new Parker administration on funding options to be effective
- Just completed budget hearings
 - The SEPTA proposal was adopted in the house this week so it is now part of legislation

Senator Nikil Saval Q & A

Impact of Current Education Funding Cuts

- **Q (Northern Liberties Neighbor):** A teacher raised an issue around current education funding
 - They are dealing with budget cuts NOW even though funding is coming to education later this year
 - It is leading to staffing issues
 - For example, Carver High School (top 5 school in the city) had 9 teachers cut of 50 which causes severe destabilization which puts the school at risk regardless of funds coming later this year
 - Teachers across the board: Science, English, History
 - 10% are emergency teachers, in process to become teachers
 - There will be a crisis come September.
 - **Question: Is there any emergency funding to see if this gap in resources can be addressed prior to September?**
- **A (Senator Saval):** Appreciates this information (is sobering), and is not sure of remaining funds available to address this issue. He asked about scale and what other schools this is affecting and will look into it.
 - There may be some remaining American Rescue Plan Funds.
 - He would also like to try to understand the number of teachers/staff affected across school and the number of schools in this same situation
 - **Follow up with a conversation with the District to understand scale (especially since teacher attrition on its own is already a significant issue)**

Bus Driver Shortage, Discrepancy with Funding for Parents to Drive Kids to School

- **Q (Northern Liberties Neighbor) :** Is it true that the city is paying parents (a total of \$4 million per month) to drive their kids to school due to a shortage in bus drivers? If so, this seems like a discrepancy around the funds from school district going towards parents to drive kids to school, especially since the cost of hiring a bus driver or increasing pay for a bus driver seems to be less than that total. Is this discrepancy under scrutiny?

- Clarified by other neighbor that the school district (own governing body) is paying parents/guardians to drive kids to school because of the bus driver shortage
- **A (Senator Saval):** Senator was aware of the shortage of bus drivers and recognizes it as occurring across districts and other cities as well, but not of the discrepancy in pay (or of the accurate amount being paid out from the district for this) vs the actual reason. **The amount (\$4 million per month) deserves scrutiny** for sure, but also recognized the overall staffing shortage in education could be a factor, pay or training/pipeline (and the fact that teachers should be paid more)

SEPTA Bus Reliability

- **Q (Neighbor):** There was also a concern raised about the reliability of SEPTA buses as a related issue. A parent whose high school kids could take SEPTA by themselves has to drive her kids to school because the buses get canceled, are late / are not reliable
- **A (Senator):** It is frustrating as he also takes SEPTA and has young kids. It is a crisis to all transit systems everywhere right now due to conditions of work. There is also a SEPTA staffing shortage for a number of reasons, including safety as a concern for drivers and transit operators. **The SEPTA Bus Revolution is aiming to help with this.**

Spring Garden L Station ADA Accessibility

- **Q (Neighbor):** Spring Garden L station is not ADA accessible. Last heard that SEPTA couldn't afford to make it ADA accessible. Do you know if it will be incorporated into the I-95 proposal?
- **A (Senator):** Senator is not sure of the plan, but know that SEPTA can apply for capital funds to make the station ADA accessible. Senator wasn't sure where it stands, but **Senator will follow up to understand SEPTA's process/plan (if any) for making it ADA accessible and can support this**

PA Turnpike Revenue Loss Due to Paper/Opaque License Plates

- **Q (Neighbor):** Millions of dollars of revenue is being lost to the state on the turnpike due to people using opaque or paper license plates when crossing bridge tolls because tickets can't be given. Is the state police talking about this at all?
- **A (Senator):** The Transportation Committee is working on mitigation and legislation associated.

Laws/Regulation Around Selling Metal in PA

- **Comment (Neighbor):** No new laws against selling metal which is why car theft of materials is high in PA
- A (Senator): **Senator will look into this**

Bus Operations – Discussion

Jeff Hornstein led discussion my setting ground rules:

- Be respectful, assume good intentions, speak for no more than 2 minutes, try not to repeat what others have said
- Please don't speak twice until everyone has had a chance to speak

Jeff walked through the background of how this began in November until now:

- Open air bus depot was dropped on us in the fall
- NLNA liaisons attended biweekly meeting with OTIS to manage on the ground feedback and advocate for businesses and neighbors

What we know:

- Bus is staying for 2-3 years per the city's decision to not move the bus companies locations again until it is to a permanent location
- Northern Liberties is not anyone's goals of a final, permanent location (it is not close enough to center city or has enough transit options to start
- OTIS shared a draft (extremely conceptual) proposal to move the bus operations to a parking lot next to the Lukoil gas station was presented with NLNA last week at a community meeting (NLNA only received 1 week's notice, we notified the community)
- There are a lot of things that need to be adjusted and factored into the concept for the parking lot design if it is to be executed, including factoring in community feedback
- Additionally, we will be circulating a survey about the bus operations situation to Northern Liberties
- Lastly, we will have another community meeting with OTIS and PPA

Design

Jeff walked through the very initial design noting that the design needs to be updated with proper traffic flow based on an analysis

Questions/Suggestions that were raised regarding the design and current situation:

- What type of fencing around the lot? How would it look? **Believe there would be wrought iron fencing and there will be landscaping**

- Suggestion to put the buildings and landscaping facing the apartments on Fairmount street, so those apartments aren't as impacted by noise and have a better view instead of busses
- **Suggestion from neighbor to the Senator and Councilman that the city support our police mini-station given we are fronting this bus operations lot and activity**
- Neighbor who lives on N Front St raised concerns around the current crime, drug needles, car break-ins and believe this bus proposal would make the situation even worse since the crime has not been mitigated currently
- Councilman Mark Squilla suggested initially to OTIS that the bus operations be at the roundhouse and Callowhill St
- Waterfront Square Property Manager brought up that a billion dollars / 10,000 units are being built and invested in around this area without knowledge that a bus stop would be here, supports other areas that are not residential such as 8th and Callowhill lot which has some trucks
 - Councilman Squilla stated that this lot is used for the Convention Center for loading and unloading before/after events
- Character of the neighborhood is moving toward residential, **could we change the zoning of the lot?** The zoning board is against making these types of changes and the property owner would likely have to support
-
- Concern was raised about property value for new developments
- Neighbor from Front/Fairmount – Concern about the fact that the bus companies don't treat neighbors well
- Question from a neighbor about how to guarantee that this will be only 2-3 years
 - Discussed that if there is a lease, could we put a provision in it that they cannot be there after 2-3 years and if they stay, there would be a penalty or fee (some of which could go towards the neighborhood?)
- Discussed ways that we could work with the lot owner to ensure it is not available for this use if the neighborhood doesn't support
- Question around not understanding why this is a good place for customers with lack of transit options and lack of ADA accessible SEPTA station
- Concerns were raised about traffic especially with new apartment units being built that will also increase traffic - need to determine be traffic flows to be the least disruptive (e.g. down Front Street and out Noble instead of having buses try to turn on Spring Garden/Columbus
- Concern that the investment is \$3 million to build this temporary solution that will not improve the situation vs investing that in SEPTA and underpass security
- Chair of Liberty Lands Committee states that there has been an increase in unhoused individuals in the park recently (last two months), cannot say if it is correlated to the bus operations move, however it is a trend that is occurring and the neighborhood is responsible for ensuring safety of those who use the neighborhood owned park
- Neighbor mentioned that similar to how the NLNA Zoning Committee operates, we should ensure that we review and approve detailed/final plans for the lot and he

also like the idea of a covenant on the lease to ensure the buses are not here past 2-3 years

- It was stated that the City knew 5 years in advance that Greyhound was leaving their terminal but little planning was done
- Agreement was made among the neighbors that **solving police issues and safety in parallel with whatever option is chosen is necessary** (potential combining of the 6th and 26th districts occurring now and potential progress with Post Brothers with the mini-station)

Q (Neighbor): Can Mark Squilla provide an update after the meeting with OTIS to be briefed on this situation and can he push OTIS to come up with a better plan than this one which is not acceptable?

A (Councilmember): Mark Squilla will get answers from OTIS as to if there is an option to move the bus out of this community and continue to work with NLNA

Next Steps:

- NLNA will send out survey to get neighbor's feedback
- NLNA will set up an additional meeting with OTIS and PPA for a community discussion with more notice/participation
- Councilman Squilla to provide any updates after his meeting with OTIS