Transportation & Access

Center City is strategically positioned at the heart of a multimodal, regional transportation network that connects the metro area’s large and diverse workforce to opportunity downtown. Center City is at the confluence of 14 rail lines, three rapid transit lines, five trolley lines and 29 local SEPTA bus routes. In January 2020, the transit system transported 300,000 daily commuters into Center City. Interstates 95 and 76, along with the Delaware River bridges, brought more than 313,000 vehicles downtown each workday. SEPTA, Amtrak and both interstates also provide quick connections between Center City and Philadelphia International Airport.

While the pandemic dramatically reduced passenger volumes on all transit modes, Philadelphia kept nearly all routes operational. Philadelphia International Airport maintained all 104 nonstop domestic and 26 international destinations throughout 2020, only suspending five seasonal international destinations, despite a 64% drop in total passengers from 2019 to 2020. Amtrak adjusted frequency of service to meet diminished demand, but continued to run all service lines, even as passenger volumes at 30th Street Station dropped by 50% from 2019 to 2020.

Within the region, State and City work-from-home mandates for all but essential employees led to a 90% drop in transit ridership between February and April 2020. SEPTA, PATCO and NJ Transit responded quickly, encouraging mask use and social distancing, increasing cleaning protocols, installing protective barriers and signage, and upgrading air systems on all vehicles and stations. Total SEPTA ridership across all modes partially recovered throughout 2020, but total passengers in January 2021 numbered 6,538,000, still down 67% from January 2020. The largest declines have been on SEPTA’s Regional Rail, where total ridership in January 2021 was 522,000, just 19% of the pre-pandemic level. Bus riders totaled 3,695,000 in January, 41% of the January 2020 total. Riders on subways and trolleys in January represented 28% to 29% of the pre-pandemic levels.

Automobile Traffic: Based on counts conducted by DVRPC, traffic volumes on the major roadways entering Center City declined by 42% at the onset of the pandemic but returned to 78% of normal capacity by September 2020. Parkway Corporation reports that across their multiple off-street garages, parking volumes since the stay-at-home order have been well below normal due to restrictions on restaurants, arts and cultural institutions and the absence of office workers.
There was a general recovery from May through September, but volume declined steadily to 35% of prior year levels in December. Similarly, the Philadelphia Parking Authority is collecting about 40% less on-street revenues than in its prior fiscal year.

Pre-pandemic, among big cities, Philadelphia was the seventh least auto-dependent, fifth most transit friendly, and fourth most walkable in America, with the most walkable areas concentrated in Center City. CCD monitors pedestrian volumes at 20 locations throughout downtown. Average daily pedestrians at these locations reached a low point of 23,233 in April 2020 and increased through the spring and summer, peaking at 91,574 in October. Placer.ai estimates that total daily pedestrian traffic within Center City declined from 444,000 in February 2020 to 123,000 in April 2020, a 72% drop, a trend that closely tracks CCD’s on-street counters. The decline has been due almost entirely to a decline in workers (down 77%) and non-resident visitors (down 85%). Visits to Center City by workers and other non-residents increased from May through October before declining in December. By spring 2021, pedestrian volumes in Center City were steadily rebounding as vaccination rates increased and employees slowly began returning to work.

The gradual reopening of retail stores and recurring street closures for restaurants to provide safe, outdoor dining helped restore some level of sidewalk vitality. “Streeteries” on 13th, 18th, and Sansom streets became destinations, allowing restaurants to expand their seating into the street, essentially pedestrianizing the entire block during peak restaurant hours. As temperatures dropped in December, restaurants throughout Center City continued to adapt by providing individual heated dining pods of all styles, in lieu of curbside parking. Philadelphia’s restaurants were sustained by this flexible reuse of curbside lanes, which has created renewed interest in rethinking the mixture of uses that can be accommodated on Center City’s streets.

Pre-pandemic, Center City was already diversifying its use of transportation modes. Since 2010, bicycle ridership in Greater Center City increased 10%; working from home grew from 5% to 8%, while the 22% of commuters using transit and the 26% walking remained constant. Within core Center City, Vine to Pine, river to river, 38% of workers walked to work, more than any other commute mode.

Looking forward, SEPTA is redesigning its bus network with the intention of implementing changes by 2023. The agency is also enhancing its customer focus by rethinking wayfinding signage. With a new administration in Washington focused on public transit and infrastructure, there may be significant opportunities to upgrade the system. However, the five-county region still needs to develop long-term, sustainable sources of funding to underwrite operating costs. This will enable Philadelphia to thrive as a major center of employment opportunity and contribute to long-term climate protection goals.

## Work Commuting Modes, 25 Largest U.S. Cities

![Graph showing work commuting modes](chart.png)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2019, 5-Year Estimates
Work Commuting Modes, Philadelphia Region

Nearly 70% of all Greater Center City residents use modes other than cars to commute to work each day.

Greater Center City Commuting Modes, Percentage Change Over Time

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages
SEPTA Transit Network

- 15 Minute Bus Routes
- 30 Minute Bus Routes
- Broad Street Line
- Market-Frankford Line
- Trolley Lines
- PATCO High Speed Line
- Regional Rail
- Norristown High Speed Line

Source: SEPTA
Transit ridership plummeted between February and April 2020 with bus volumes showing the largest recovery.
Philadelphia has maintained its multimodal infrastructure through the pandemic. As the pandemic abates, emergency federal funding and rigorous health and safety efforts by transportation agencies are providing the foundation for economic recovery.