

A split over Alviti's actions at RIPTA

By
Jacquelyn Voghel

08/18/2023

Following R.I. Department of Transportation Director Peter Alviti's controversial appointment as the **R.I. Public Transit Authority's** board chairman, transit advocates are divided on whether Alviti is demanding needed accountability from a mismanaged agency or undermining public confidence in an underfunded service.

One month into Alviti's tenure, few dispute that RIPTA has a daunting task ahead: In May, the agency projected a \$40 million shortfall in fiscal 2025 as COVID-19 pandemic relief funding runs out and reported a 50% decrease in ridership during the pandemic.

In Alviti's first meeting as chair last month, he criticized RIPTA for what he described as a lack of accountability and direction.

Alviti also highlighted low ridership rates, with just 3% of Rhode Island residents using RIPTA, and he criticized the agency for seeking more funding without a plan to reform the service.

"I think what builds the taxpayers' confidence ... is first, the agency operating in a **proper manner that breeds confidence**," Alviti told PBN. "It needs to provide a successful product for the public."

Like many public transit advocates, Patricia Raub, co-coordinator of **Rhode Island Transit Riders**, opposed the idea of Alviti, who she says tends to favor cars over buses, leading the RIPTA board. Instead, she preferred a continuation of independent leadership.

Raub says she wants to give Alviti a chance but wasn't encouraged by his first meeting.

RIPTA has outlined a plan to adjust its services, Raub says, but chronic underfunding often makes bus routes inconvenient, in turn lowering ridership. She pointed to RIPTA's Transit Master Plan.

"But it's only doable with increased funding from the legislature," she said. "I don't think Alviti completely understands the equity issues involved here."

John Flaherty, deputy director of **Grow Smart Rhode Island**, agrees that RIPTA's issue is underfunding rather than mismanagement.

"I would like to see an earnest effort on the part of all leaders to understand what is most needed funding-wise ... [and] less finger-pointing," Flaherty said.

But other transit advocates – including some who have traditionally opposed Alviti's decisions at RIDOT – say they're pleasantly surprised by his initial actions.

Barry Schiller, a former RIPTA board member and public transportation advocate, says he's long harbored concerns with Alviti-led initiatives, including a push for a "multi-hub" busing system in downtown Providence.

But after Alviti's first meeting, "I'm starting to see the other side a little bit," Schiller said. "There's no question the board needed a little oversight, and ... [Alviti is] right when he says that a very small percentage of Rhode Islanders actually use RIPTA."

Schiller believes that the RIPTA staff runs "a reasonably good system, but they're ignoring the fact that not many people use [the bus], and I think Peter Alviti is right to call attention to that."

He says he also appreciated that Alviti directed RIPTA staff to respond to public comment, noting that the agency previously was only required to hear comments.

Alviti has also won support from labor leader and current RIPTA board member Patrick Crowley.

"A cultural change is already starting to take effect," Crowley said. "The prior board leadership, in my estimation, was too passive in its role as the leader of the agency."