

NEW JERSEY

Two bills aim to make NJ transportation more accessible for people with disabilities



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With New Jersey set to receive billions of dollars in federal infrastructure funding, lawmakers in Trenton are pushing to ensure new transportation projects are accessible to people with disabilities.

The state Senate on Thursday was scheduled to consider two bipartisan bills, including one (S-147) that would require the state Transportation Department to draft an accessibility plan whenever streets, highways or transportation projects are being designed or maintained.

The legislation calls for plans to "promote the ability of persons diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities to travel independently."

A second bill, S-146, would establish a state Transportation Research Bureau that would award contracts to colleges and universities to study mobility needs of people with "physical, sensory, intellectual, and developmental disabilities."

The measures are sponsored by state Sen. Patrick J. Diegnan Jr., a Middlesex County Democrat who chairs the chamber's Transportation Committee, and Sen. Kristin M. Corrado, a Republican representing parts of Bergen, Passaic, Morris and Essex counties.

Companion legislation has yet to be introduced in the state Assembly, but accessibility advocates are rallying behind the proposals.

"These are extremely important bills," said Javier Robles, a Rutgers University professor and organizer of the New Jersey Disabilities Action Committee. "We saw this during COVID when people couldn't get [outside.]"

The Disabilities Action Committee published a scathing report in 2020 that faulted the state for failing to protect people with disabilities during the health crisis. Prominent on its list were gaps in the transportation system stemming from a lack of foresight about the needs of vulnerable residents.

Robles stressed the importance of accommodating a variety of disabilities, not just those served by adding a sidewalk curb cut or a ramp on a bus.

New Jersey is due to see a blitz of new public works projects in the coming years, as it receives its share of the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure law approved by Congress and President Joe Biden last year.

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The federal Americans with Disabilities Act already requires public accommodations to be accessible, but disability advocates said it's often enforced after the fact. For example, a \$250,000 makeover announced last fall at the AirTrain Rail Link station at Newark Liberty International Airport came only after a years-long investigation into ADA violations.

The proposed state legislation, advocates said, would embed mobility questions into the early stages of planning transit projects.

Amtrak has started to address a more diverse range of disability needs, noted Hackensack's Arlene Romoff, who uses cochlear implants after losing her hearing.

The railroad is installing induction looping technology, allowing people with impaired hearing to better understand announcements on the train, she said. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey has made similar upgrades at information counters in some of its stations.

"This should be the standard for all trains in New Jersey," said Romoff. "People with hearing loss cannot hear the announcements when traveling on the trains, and all too often there aren't enough visible signs in the stations. This makes it stressful and often impossible to know when to get off the train."

Easterseals New Jersey, which provides programs for 4,000 adults with intellectual and

clients, said Matt Binder, an advocacy manager for the East Brunswick-based group.

“Public transportation is a lifeline for a lot of our program participants,” Binder said. “They sometimes take Uber, but because we serve a vulnerable population, a lot of people get taken advantage of. So they really rely on public transport.

The legislation, Binder hopes, will extend accommodations "beyond the classic image of someone in a wheelchair to include people with autism. We need voice commands, signs that are more visible. All of that would be a really big improvement."

Robles' Disability Action Committee, Easterseals New Jersey and The New Jersey Statewide Independent Living Council all support the bills and see them as a step in the right direction, but they all share a critique.

"Neither bill requires input from the disability community or from established councils such as ours," said Norman Smith, the Living Council's chairman. "We know that research and policies can be unintentionally skewed without proper input."

Gene Myers covers disability and mental health for NorthJersey.com and the USA Today Network. For unlimited access to the most important news from your local community, please subscribe or activate your digital account today.

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