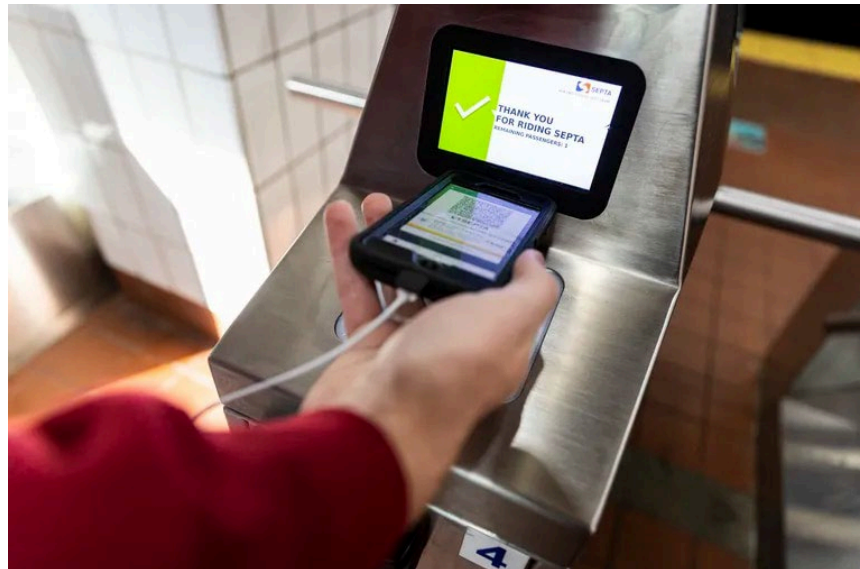


SEPTA is working out kinks in its mobile phone ticketing feature. Volunteer testers report frustration.

by [Thomas Fitzgerald](#)
Oct 24, 2022

Mark Chadwick wants to help. He downloaded the software to his Android. He keeps trying to use it but can't.

“I still have not been able to make a ticket,” said Chadwick, a volunteer beta tester of SEPTA’s mobile phone ticketing app, which is in development. His round of field trials began Oct. 3.



If all goes well, the interface downloads a QR-code ticket that can be read at turnstiles as well as the bus or trolley farebox on city transit. It's paid for with a credit card entered on the app.

One thing it can't do: Use money stored in the Travel Wallet of a rider's Key Card. Several testers, who mostly are frequent SEPTA users, said that's frustrating. They also described the process of downloading mobile tickets as cumbersome, not made for spontaneous excursions.

SEPTA officials acknowledge some glitches, unclear communication, and initial confusion as early testers discovered they could not link their Key Cards to the mobile ticket function or use Apple or Google Pay, as do passengers on many other U.S. transit systems. But fixes are being applied and improvements like contactless payments with debit and credit cards are coming soon.

“We're getting constructive feedback,” said William Zebrowski, SEPTA's chief information officer. “What's good is we're not seeing anything that's a blocker, where we'd have to halt the program.”

More beta testers coming on board

The authority is forging ahead. It sent an additional 2,500 email invitations Wednesday afternoon to people who had expressed an interest in participating in the trial. At least 1,000 people downloaded the new software in the first 24 hours, officials said. And contactless payments with bank cards are coming soon.

The drive to upgrade its fare-collection technology comes at a pivotal time for SEPTA: It needs to revive its ridership before federal pandemic-recovery aid for transit systems is all spent. Overall, about 60% as many people are taking the authority's buses, subways, trolleys, and Regional Rail trains as did in 2019.

Tester Todd Schwartz, of South Philadelphia, said he was disappointed because he expected an experience similar to using the Google or Apple payment platforms.

"It's laborious, and they're defeating the purpose by adding an extra step," he said. "It would be easier just to flick out your Key Card."

Cameron Adamez, a tester with years of experience as a web designer and developer, said they had used the mobile ticketing app only a couple of times. "It's some amount of OK," they said.

It would be more useful if it was linked to the Key Card's Travel Wallet. "Actually getting a ticket was super easy, but it's not as flexible as I'd hoped," said Adamez, of South Philadelphia. They like the option to purchase multiple tickets at once, new with mobile ticketing.

Designed for an occasional user

The target audience for mobile ticketing is more of an occasional user of SEPTA than people carrying Key Card balances, said Kevin O'Brien, senior SEPTA Key program manager.

"They're not really competing with each other," O'Brien said. "Key Cards have most of the benefits mobile ticketing would have except for the multi-rider feature." Said Zebrowski: "We really looked at convenience ... Be at the bus station or head down to the subway, maybe to an Eagles game or the Phillies game this weekend. If I have four others in my party, I activate four tickets" and go.

To Jared Cohen, the problem is that SEPTA has insisted on building everything on its own in-house app instead of interfacing with third-party apps people are already using, such as Transit App, Google Maps, and Apple Maps.

"The end result has been a complete mess of an app that crashes frequently, logs you out randomly, gives inaccurate or difficult-to-understand information, and just generally feels

like a chore to use,” said Cohen, a junior at Temple University majoring in geography and urban studies. “Now add a mobile ticketing system on top of that, and you get a mess of an experience.”

He finds it easier to mostly use his plastic tap-and-go Key Card but did find that mobile ticketing was handy when he was able to pay for a classmate to board a bus with him recently.

Other cities have figured it out

Key, which introduced plastic cards riders loaded with funds at ticket vending machines and SEPTA sales offices, has suffered from glitches and cost overruns since it was introduced in 2016 — two years later than scheduled. SEPTA has paid about \$239 million, nearly twice the original negotiated price of \$122 million.

That’s because SEPTA required Conduent, the contractor that built the system, to fix initial problems and to maintain and keep the system up-to-date, which includes adapting to new technology like mobile ticketing.

Software development and installation of new fare readers capable of handling mobile tickets cost about \$5.75 million, officials said. Conduent is doing the work to stand up mobile ticketing.

The plan is to make mobile ticketing available to the public early in 2023, SEPTA officials said. Then the agency will begin to test allowing direct payments from credit and debit cards and Google or Apple Pay.

Chadwick, who lives in South Philly, owns a Center City advertising company with offices in New York, so he goes there often. He said he loves the MTA’s Omni payment system, which allows him to use Google Pay linked to a transit card, to pay for rides.

“It’s the least friction I’ve ever had with [paying for] public transit,” he said. “You don’t even break stride at the turnstiles.” On a visit to Chicago recently, he seamlessly integrated the CTA’s Ventra card and noticed about 300 transit systems options on his payment app.

“How do all these other agencies figure things out and SEPTA can’t?” Chadwick said.