Testimony: Senate Finance Committee; Monday June 17, 2019 @ 10 a.m.

Good morning. Mr. Chairman, members of the committee – my name is Claudia Amrhein. I am the Treasurer of the Ohio Public Transit Association (OPTA) and GM/CEO of Portage Area Regional Transportation Authority in Portage County, Ohio.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am here today to respectfully request the Senate to restore the $6.5 million cut from fund #775451 in the bill under consideration. This line item provides $6.5 million in each year of the biennium to support the Elderly and Disabled Fare Assistance Program, ensuring Ohio’s most vulnerable residents have access to transportation services to access healthcare, jobs, and basic living necessities.

The FTA requires transit systems to allow seniors and those with disabilities to ride for half fare. The state’s elderly and disabled fare assistance program helps transit systems to offset this loss of revenue, particularly in small urban and rural areas, which are geographically widespread and expensive to service.

The 2015 ODOT Statewide Transit Needs Study concluded that “Transit investment is an integral part of Ohio’s future…” The study found that Ohio’s population is getting older and poorer. Especially in rural areas, seniors and low income individuals are relying more on public transportation. And as health & human services are directed more towards home-based services, populations who are transit dependent, including disabled individuals, are aging in place, stressing the already limited resources of public transit systems.

PARTA serves Portage County, where a 2017 Transportation & Health Needs Assessment and community survey indicated that 1/2 of residents surveyed reported having transportation problems monthly; 1/3 do not own a working or reliable vehicle. Portage County is largely rural, with a population of 163,000 spanning just under 500 square miles.

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| State funding for public transit in Ohio has been on the decline since the year 2000. Updated census estimates further support the Transit Needs Study projections showing increased demand for public transit. In May, the Cleveland Plain Dealer reported that by 2020, Ohio will have more residents over the age of 60 than people under the age of 20. Twenty years ago, in the year 2000, zero counties had more over 60s than under 20s. But by 2020, 64 of Ohio’s 88 counties are on target for the older group to outnumber the younger.  Given this trend, supporting safe, reliable transportation for our seniors who are aging in place and disabled populations is more critical than ever for ensuring access to medical treatment, jobs, and basis living necessities. This $6.5 million of transit funding, along with the previously approved $70 million in the transportation budget is vitally important for transit systems. OPTA respectfully requests that the Senate restore this funding and work to advance the Transit Needs Study recommendation of funding 10% of transit needs.  Thank you very much for your consideration. |

Claudia B. Amrhein

General Manager

PARTA

[Amrhein.c16@partaonline.org](mailto:Amrhein.c16@partaonline.org)