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SFY 2024-25 Transportation Budget Testimony

Claudia Amrhein, General Manager/CEO Portage Area Regional Transportation Authority (PARTA); President, Ohio Public Transit Association (OPTA)

Chairwoman Kunze, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Senate Transportation Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding the state transportation budget for Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025.

My name is Claudia Amrhein. I am the President of the Ohio Public Transit Association (OPTA), the primary advocate for public transit in Ohio, and GM/CEO of Portage Area Regional Transportation Authority in Portage County, Ohio.

Public transportation is a vital link for millions of Ohioans. Employers in every community are trying to fill jobs. Businesses small and large cite worker transportation as an obstacle to filling essential employment vacancies. Medical facilities and nursing homes too cite the lack of reliable transportation for their patients and workers as an impediment to providing medical care.

Employment, economic development, and healthcare: these crucial social priorities have something in common: public transit intersects with each one of them every single day.

OPTA is pleased and very grateful that the administration is committing funding to public transportation at the same level as has been appropriated for the current fiscal year. I'd also like to thank you for your support for the workforce mobility partnership program amendment, which will allow transit agencies to focus efforts on workforce and economic development across Ohio.

This continued investment is a tremendous step toward recognizing the people, businesses and communities who count on public transit.

What links us all, in every community, whether large or small, urban, rural, or suburban – is that people in every community need access to jobs, healthcare, education, social activities, and basic daily needs like housing and fresh food.

Across Ohio, every person needs access to resources to live and to thrive - regardless of how they are able to access them – by car, bike, walking, transit, wheelchair, or pushing a child in a stroller.

Rural and suburban areas often aren't accessible to fixed route services, lacking pedestrian amenities like sidewalks, safe crossings, and curb cuts. And having a reliable car isn't the answer for everyone. Like other largely rural and geographically widespread communities, many Portage County residents rely on PARTA for door-to-door transportation to reach dialysis, grocery stores, medical and pharmacy services, and jobs.

Like a 79-year-old woman who lives in Windham, located at the far eastern edge of the county, who rides PARTA to get to the grocery store and pharmacy. And a legally blind Kent State graduate, who chose to stay in the area following graduation, who rides PARTA to her job at a nursing home.

Local funding varies widely. In Portage County, we are fortunate to have a dedicated ¼% sales tax to support transit services. But in many rural communities, there is no dedicated local funding, leaving gaps in service and federal dollars on the table due to lack of local matching funds.

Stable and predictable state general revenue funding is critical to maintaining essential transit services across Ohio. Investment in transit by our state leaders is a vital link for our those seeking employment, people with mobility challenges, and seniors. Likewise, investing in public transit will help achieve Ohio's economic development goals to retain and attract talent and grow Ohio's economy and workforce.

Chairwoman Kunze, thank you for the opportunity to speak today in support of transit investment in the transportation budget. I appreciate your attention and consideration and am happy to answer any questions you or members of the committee may have.