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Ohio House Transportation Committee – Proponent Testimony H.B. 54
Laura Koprowski, Chief Executive Officer
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Chairman Willis, Vice Chair Daniels, Ranking Member Grim, and distinguished members of the committee: Thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on H.B. 54, the Ohio transportation budget bill.

My name is Laura Koprowski, and I am the Chief Executive Officer at the Toledo Area Regional Transit Authority also known as TARTA. TARTA's services connect people to essential destinations such as jobs, education, and healthcare. I also ride our system and I had a lot more company on board in 2024. Our ridership rose by 56 percent on one of our busiest routes and 22 percent throughout our entire system.

Since 2022, TARTA's service area has greatly expanded so that we now cover nearly all of Lucas County as well as the City of Rossford in Wood County, making public transit a viable option for thousands more northwest Ohioans.

As a growing transit system, TARTA requires growing investment. Without robust state transportation funding, it would not have been possible for TARTA to launch the popular TARTA Flex microtransit service that operates in 11 suburban communities. ODOT funding covered the cost of the vehicles, service hours, and the TARTA Flex smart phone app. In only two years, the TARTA Flex service has attracted over 8,000 registered riders and has doubled in ridership. Last year, we completed more than 50,000 trips. Again, state funding from the last transportation budget bill made this new, innovative service possible.

Also in the last transportation budget bill was the inclusion of the Workforce Mobility Partnership Program. It financially supported projects in the rural and urban areas of Ohio that are challenged to transport workforce to significant employment centers or to places of employment outside of their resident community. TARTA has been awarded two grants from this program that will address workforce transportation gaps in Wood County and increase service to critical job sites in the TARTA service area. We urge our legislators to continue funding the Workforce Mobility Partnership

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Program, especially in a time when so many businesses are challenged with getting workers to their jobs.

H.B. 54 can also make our public transit systems safer by amending the Ohio Revised Code so that it is a felony for assaulting a public transit driver. School bus drivers already have this protection – as they should – and we are simply asking for equal recognition and respect for Ohio public transit drivers and security employees.

Unfortunately, TARTA knows all too well about the risks of being a public transit employee and the need to keep our systems safe for all. Early evening of December 2, 2024, three TARTA female employees were assaulted by a habitual offender at our downtown Transit Hub. The TARTA Transit Hub is a busy place with hundreds of riders using this facility daily. At all hours of the day, the transit hub is active with customers including children, the elderly, the disabled, and others with mobility challenges trying to get work and other essential destinations.

Even with the amount of customers present, the assailant attacked three TARTA employees – two drivers and a security ambassador – as well as multiple female customers. The assailant entered one of our buses to assault our driver, then moved on to assault another driver who was standing outside our bus with customers. Finally, our security ambassador who was reacting to this situation was also physically attacked to the point that she had to be transported to the hospital.

Afterwards, I spoke to two of our TARTA employees who were victims in this attack. They were both understandably emotional and continuing to physically feel the effects of the attack, but they expressed their dedication to protecting our customers. These women are public servants dedicated to ensuring a safe transportation experience for our customers.

Again, Ohio law currently only acknowledges that assaulting a school bus driver is a felony. I am dumbfounded why public transit drivers are not also included in this law. My drivers transport children – even our paratransit and microtransit services – transport children. And again, we transport other vulnerable populations of the elderly and disabled.

My public transit colleagues from around the state – urban, suburban and rural – have all had their drivers assaulted over the years. It is unfortunate, but it is the reality that we live in. Yet, Ohioans deserve to know that the state and transit systems are doing everything possible to ensure a safe mode of transportation. So, I respectfully request that we amend the current ORC language to include assaulting a public transit driver is a felony and that we take care of this unfortunate oversight in the current transportation budget bill.

I want to share the words of my co-worker, Kelly, who was one of the victims.

"As a 1st hand victim of a brutal assault working as transit security this has changed my entire life. There needs to be a heavier penalty when there are assaults on us transit workers. We should be looked at as how EMT's, Firemen, and Police are as they are servicing the public. I believe it is necessary to reduce the probability of assaults on transit workers by having the penalties raised."

Thank you for your time, your attention to these matters, and for hearing my testimony today. On behalf of our Team TARTA employees and Board of Trustees, we appreciate the state's ongoing financial support of public transit and excited to show this legislature how many more positive changes can occur with the proper funding behind us.

