



Ohio House Transportation Committee
Howard Stewart, Transit Director
South East Area Transit

"Chairman Willis, Vice-Chair Daniels, Ranking Member Grim and members of the House Transportation Committee: I would like to take a moment to thank you for giving me the time to share at this hearing on an issue that is near the heart of thousands of transit workers, Ohioans, and executive directors like me, which is state funding for public transportation. |

My name is Howard Stewart, Jr, and I am the Transit Director for South East Area Transit. SEAT is a rural transit system in southeastern Ohio that serves citizens of Muskingum and Guernsey Counties. An area with a combined population of just under 125,000 people.

In 2012 when I walked into the doors at SEAT, I'm going to be honest, I wasn't sure if I wanted to stay or turn around and walk back out. Our finances were in shambles, our ridership was trending down, and we had a dart board on the wall full of bills to determine which one we would pay next. At best, the system was a mess, and I knew I had my hands full. With a background in the non-profit world, and great board support, I knew we were up for the challenge and that, members of the committee, is why I am standing here to tell you our success story.

From 2012 to 2017 we worked tirelessly to bring SEAT into the positive. We focused on our basics, stayed away from anything complex and found a smooth ride in contentment. Combined with our Fixed Route and Curb-to-curb services we completed 143,000 rides that year. Most of those riders were our fixed route "regular" riders who had used SEAT generationally.

In April 2018 South East Area Transit made the final payment to clear our debt and proudly announced we were in the positive. With the opportunity of gaining knowledge, a grant for technology and a transition of staff, a decision to take a new approach to business was made. By listening to our communities' needs, developing new strategies and navigating our new mindset for operations, SEAT was determined to show the communities in which we live just how much we could rise to the occasion.

Over the course of the last six years our transportation has flourished. What once was a taxicab service serving less than one passenger per hour with 22 vehicles on the road, it is now a system that has over 100 different vehicle options and serves more than five passengers per hour on our in-county transportation and on our busiest month, scheduled over 23,000 trips on our curb-to-curb demand response service. In combination with both services, the last two years SEAT saw



numbers for scheduled and/or completed rides hit over 300,000 rides. You heard that right. Providing over 300,000 rides the last two years is a huge increase over the 143,000 the previous 6 years..

I could stand here before you and give you numbers about our outstanding on time performance averaging over 99%, our new ridership numbers breaking over 8,000 unique riders or the fact that our safety training calendar is over and beyond any Ohio Department of Transportation or Federal Transit Administration regulation requires. Instead, I'll leave you with this.

In Southeastern Ohio people ride public transportation because they need to, not because they want to. They are elderly adults that were productive their whole lives and now can't drive, disabled individuals that rely on us to get them to and from destinations safely, or the single mom trying to get to work as well as taking her and her child to their doctors' appointments.

Every day public transportation riders report to us the lack of food, shelter, and utilities or explain the struggle to get something so simple as a gallon of milk. At SEAT we met a mom and kids who were homeless at a local park and helped ease their burden as we found them transportation, shelter, assisted with filling out applications, finding daycare along our fixed route and even helped rally a donation for clothes, shoes and beds.

We apply for grants for wheelchair ramps, help find new or used mobility devices like wheelchairs, walkers or canes, but more importantly we provide a friendly face for someone who needs to know that public transportation is available so instead of being stranded they have options.

"Chairman Willis, Vice-Chair Daniels, Ranking Member Grim and members of the House Transportation Committee: I would like to leave you with this today. As you cast votes for Public Transportation dollars, and evaluate the need of the services to the communities remember this: South East Area Transit does not just provide transportation services, we move people to provide hope.

Thank you for your time.