

Testimony Before the Ohio House Transportation Committee**Sally Fish, Disability Rights Advocate****The Ability Center of Greater Toledo**

Good afternoon, Chair Willis, Vice Chair Daniels, Ranking Member Grim, and all other members of the House Transportation Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 54. My name is Sally Fish, and I am a Disability Rights Advocate with the Ability Center of Greater Toledo. The Ability Center is a Center for Independent Living serving 14 counties in Northwest Ohio. Our mission is to make our community the most disability-friendly in the nation by increasing independence for people with disabilities, helping individuals discover their true passions, and shifting public perceptions about disability.

I'm here today to talk about why expanding passenger rail connections across Ohio is critical for our disability and aging communities. Reliable, accessible transportation isn't just a convenience—it's a necessity. And rejoining the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission (MIPRC) is a key step to ensuring Ohio's future rail systems are fully accessible to everyone.

Ohioans with Disabilities Need Better Access to Passenger Rail

According to the CDC, 36.1% of Ohio's population has a disability. For many, accessible public transportation is crucial for independence, yet Ohio's current options remain severely limited.

In 2023, the Ability Center started hearing from our consumers and advocates that passenger rail is far more accessible than other modes of transportation—especially compared to air travel. Flying often separates people from their mobility devices, making travel difficult and, in some cases, unsafe. Restroom access is another major challenge. Passenger rail, however, allows individuals to remain with their mobility aids, move more freely, and access essential services with far greater ease.

When we learned that the State of Ohio and the Ohio Rail Development Commission (ORDC) planned to apply for the federal Corridor ID Program to expand passenger rail, we saw an opportunity to ensure accessibility was prioritized in these efforts. In response, the Ability Center launched a survey to gather community input. In just six weeks, we received over 500 responses from people with and without disabilities. Here's what we found:

1. There is strong interest in expanded passenger rail from both people with and without disabilities—especially among adults aged 25 to 65+. Even those who don't regularly use public transit want these connections.
2. People in Northwest Ohio want intercity rail to connect them to major cities in Ohio and Southern Michigan—especially Columbus.
3. Expanding intercity rail would strengthen Northwest Ohio's cultural, social, and economic ties.

4. The current rail system doesn't meet these needs—it's too limited, slow, expensive, and inaccessible.

Growing Excitement for the Detroit-Toledo-Cleveland Corridor

One of the most exciting developments for Ohioans with disabilities in Northwest Ohio is the potential for a **Detroit-Toledo-Cleveland passenger rail corridor**. Our advocacy efforts and survey responses have made it clear that this connection would be life-changing for many. It would provide a **direct, accessible, and convenient** link to major economic and medical hubs, allowing people with disabilities to reach jobs, educational opportunities, and specialized healthcare services with ease.

Currently, travel between these cities is difficult for individuals who rely on public transportation, often requiring multiple transfers, long wait times, and inaccessible options. A dedicated rail corridor would eliminate many of these barriers, enabling seamless travel between Northwest Ohio and the rest of the state and region. We are hopeful that additions to our passenger rail system, such as the Detroit-Toledo-Cleveland Corridor, will also make the way for additional connections such as **Toledo-Columbus**.

Toledo is the only major city in Ohio without a direct route to the state capital, creating significant challenges for residents—especially people with disabilities who have limited or no access to a personal vehicle—when traveling to Columbus.

Rejoining the MIPRC and Increasing Rail Funding

Rejoining the MIPRC is one of the most important steps Ohio can take to secure the future of passenger rail in our state. The MIPRC provides a crucial platform for regional collaboration, helping states develop and coordinate improved rail service. For Ohio, this means better access to federal funding, stronger regional connections, and a greater focus on accessibility.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law has created historic funding opportunities for rail expansion. But to take full advantage of these resources, Ohio needs a seat at the table. Rejoining the MIPRC will strengthen our state's ability to secure federal grants, which can be used to modernize stations, improve train accessibility, and ensure compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Without these investments, Ohio risks falling behind while neighboring states move forward.

Conclusion

Passenger rail is a game-changer for people with disabilities, older adults, and all Ohioans who need reliable, accessible, and efficient transportation. But to make this vision a reality, Ohio must uphold its commitment to expanding and enhancing these vital connections.

I urge this committee to not only support HB 54 and Ohio's reentry into the MIPRC but to also prioritize increased funding for passenger rail expansion. These investments will create a more connected, inclusive, and economically vibrant Ohio—one where everyone has access to the transportation they need to live and thrive within their community.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,

Sally Fish

Disability Rights Advocate

The Ability Center of Greater Toledo